

Occasion: Third Sunday in Advent (C)

Date: 12-13-2009

Text: Philippians 4:4-7

Title: Rejoicing in the Christ of Christmas

Introduction:

I would imagine that over the years, most, if not all, of you, have seen the Charlie Brown Christmas special. The show starts out with a song sung by children and all the peanuts characters ice skating on a pond.

Christmas time is here	Snowflakes in the air
Happiness and cheer	Carols everywhere
Fun for all	Olden times
That children call	And ancient rhymes
Their favorite time of year	Of love and dreams to share

Then, we break away to a conversation between Charlie Brown and Linus:

CHARLIE BROWN: I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that. But I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.



LINUS: Charlie Brown, you're the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem. Maybe Lucy's right. Of all the Charlie Browns in the world, you're the Charlie Browniest.

The problem for Charlie Brown was that even though at Christmas time he was surrounded by all the festive symbols and traditions of Christmas, all those external festivities of the season did not take away the deep inner anxieties and struggles of Charlie Brown's life. What troubled Charlie Brown going into the Christmas season continued to ail him all during the season as well. And none of the symbols, traditions or festive gatherings could take his troubles away.

I don't know about you, but there are times I feel like Charlie Brown. Circumstances around me, or sometimes, even inside me, are not always the best, not always what I would like them to be.

Setting:

For the apostle Paul, as he writes the words that are the Epistle Lesson for this Third Sunday in Advent, circumstances surrounding him were not the best. As Paul writes to the Philippian Christians, Paul is imprisoned in Rome, under guard and unable to move about freely and go about his mission work. Paul is awaiting his trial before Caesar, not knowing whether he will be set free or face execution. Certainly, Paul had much to be troubled and anxious about. Yet, Paul does not get mired in the "gloom and doom" his situation, but rather, finds reason to "rejoice" and to encourage the Philippian Christians to do the same.

What is Paul's secret to joy? How can he "rejoice" when circumstances around him are glum, even dire? If the apostle Paul were in Linus' shoes, what would he have said to Charlie Brown to help?

I. TWO VIEWS OF LOOKING AT YOUR LIFE:

To understand what the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, we have to first understand a basic truth in life: ***Your circumstances can control your attitude and your emotions, OR, you can control your attitude and emotions based on something more stable, more sound, more secure, than the fluctuations of what goes on all around you.***

You know that in life the circumstances around vary greatly from day to day or week to week.

Things can be going well for an extended amount of time, and often, when things are going well we have a positive attitude and our emotions are happy, joyful or at least peaceful. Good circumstances, good things often lead us to feel good, to have a good attitude.

Yet, circumstances never stay positive indefinitely. Something will go wrong. Bad news will come. It may be about a family member or friend. It may involve you. In this economy, many have lost a job or have faced cutbacks in hours worked or salary paid. Health always varies, from simple colds and flu to more serious issues, some involving surgery or extended treatment and therapy. From time to time, death claims a friend or loved one, perhaps even a parent, spouse or child.

As we go through life, one of the things we can count on, is that circumstances will change. If circumstances control our attitudes and emotions, then we will ride the "emotional roller coaster" of ups and downs, peaks and valleys, through all the changing circumstances in life. **But, if we base our attitudes, our emotions on something that does not change, that remains constant and immovable, then we can find a stability in life, even amidst all the changing circumstances around us!** The KEY is to find something that is stable, sound and secure, that does not change! Then, we can be positive, even rejoice, yes—when circumstances are going well, but yes—also when circumstances are not going well, when there is trouble and turmoil all about us.

II. THE FOUNDATION OF LIFE—THE LORD:

For the apostle Paul, his attitude and his emotions were not controlled by the circumstances going on all around him. No! For Paul, his attitude and his emotions were based on the Lord, on God's love for him and on what God has done for Him in Christ, to redeem him from sin and to give him everlasting life. Thus, even in prison, even facing trial, Paul could rejoice and urge the Philippian Christians to **"Rejoice in the Lord always!"**

In the book of the prophet Malachi, God says:

⁶"I the LORD do not change." – *Malachi 3:6*

In the books of Hebrews, Scripture tells us:

⁸"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." – *Hebrews 13:8*

Unlike the circumstances, the people, or the world around us, God does not change! Jesus Christ does not change! What Christ has done for us as our Savior does not change! God, God's love and God's grace are 100% constant, and are the same throughout all the changing circumstances of the world and of our lives.

What the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome who were facing persecution, imprisonment, even death, even though those Christians were in the worst of circumstances, Paul encouraged them:

³¹What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God Who justifies. ³⁴Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, Who died—more than that, Who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him Who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. – *Romans 8:31-39*

For the apostle Paul, what did not change was God and the love of God in Christ Jesus as the Savior. And for Paul, whatever the circumstances going on around him, God and God's love were the foundation of his life, his faith, his attitude and his emotions. Paul could rejoice, Paul could urge the Philippian Christians to rejoice, – in all circumstances, because Paul wrote: **"Rejoice in the Lord always!"** and not **"Rejoice in your circumstances!"** nor **"Rejoice in the world!"**

Paul went on to write immediately after the words of today's Epistle Lesson:

¹¹for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³***I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.***
– *Philippians 4:11-13*

So, what are we to do in the negative circumstances? What are we to do when trouble comes into our life? Bad things do happen. What do we do? Paul wrote:

⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. – *Philippians 4:6*

God, God's love, God's goodness, God's mercy are constant and always there for His people. When bad things happen, commend them into the care and control of God. You know He will work His plan and purpose, and He will do what is best. Now, yes, that's hard to do, especially in the most difficult of circumstances. Yet, that is the way to joy and peace. Thus, Paul concluded that when you commend all things into God's hands:

⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. – *Philippians 4:7*

There is a "Peace" for God's people, a "Peace" available to them from God, a "Peace" that transcends all understanding because it is a "Peace" in the midst of the storm, a "Peace" that is founded on God and His love and not on the chaos and turmoil of what is going on in your life.

Conclusion:

In this Advent Season, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we know that our joy is not based on the festive symbols and traditions of the season. Sure, the lights are pretty, the tree is beautiful, the gifts are great, the food is delightful, and the time with family is priceless. But that is not the real joy of Christmas.

The Christ of Christmas is the joy of God's people. The Christ of Christmas is why we "Rejoice"! We "Rejoice" in God! We "Rejoice" in the love of God in Christ Jesus! We "Rejoice" in the forgiveness of sins He came to win for us! We "Rejoice" in the greatest gift, the Gift of Everlasting Life that is ours in Christ Jesus!

*"Charlie Brown, life isn't fair, and life isn't easy! You of all people know that! Yet, even in the midst of our personal flaws and failures, even in the midst of all the chaos, problems and conflicts in the world, we can find joy! **"Rejoice in the Lord always!"** Rejoice at Christmas in God's gift of His Son! Rejoice that God has not abandoned you to your failures and corruption, but that God has come in Jesus to redeem you from sin and damnation, that you may be His now and forever! Charlie Brown, **"Rejoice in the Lord always!"** AMEN*