

Pastor Jon's Sermon from October 15, 2023 based on Philippians 4:1-9 "How can we rejoice always with everything going on in our world?"

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Easier said than done, right? To rejoice in the Lord always with everything happening in our world.

How can the Apostle Paul write, what is known as his letter of joy, to the Philippian church from prison... especially when he doesn't know if he will get out? What is it about his faith Jesus Christ that allows him to be content in any situation? Or to say earlier to live is Christ to die is gain?

How can we rejoice in the Lord always when maybe things in our lives aren't going so well, or when people we love are hurting or sick, or when people are dying from war in places like Israel and Palestine? Humans show no signs of letting up. People are continuing the age-old patterns of killing and retaliation.

Right now, Palestinians are being told to move to the south of Gaza with no food or water or humanitarian support... or any place to go. I fear many more innocent people will die.

How can we rejoice when all you want to do is offer laments?

But the verse I find comfort in this week is: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

What does this gentleness that Paul is talking about look like? How can it spill over into how we talk, or listen to the media, or how we make judgements about what's happening in the Middle East?

Gentleness in the original Greek language of the New Testament has this idea of reasonableness in judging. The word signifies humble, patient steadfastness which is able to submit to injustice, disgrace, and maltreatment without hatred and malice, trusting in God in spite of all of it. It is knowing that God is with us even in times of suffering and pain, and that we have a future of hope already prepared for us.

What is happening in Israel and Palestine, especially in the Gaza Strip is unconscionable. Let's say 90% of the people are getting punished for 10% of the people's actions. Just to make it clear, the views and actions of Hamas do not represent all Palestinians. Hamas is a terrorist group. I visited the Gaza strip in 2000 and know that the large majority of Palestinian Christians and Muslims are peace loving people who just want dignity and freedom and their own state. And the actions of the Israeli government and military response don't represent all Israeli's views. The Israeli Government's response of collective punishment for all Palestinians is excessive and wrong. It breaks the international rules of war.

Pastor Niveen Sarras, a Palestinian Christian, and Lutheran Pastor at St. Marks in Neenah invited me to a webinar on Friday hosted by Rev Mitri Raheb of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. When asked by Americans who were tuning in, what can we do? He responded, "You can pray." He said, "When you pray, it means you care. When you pray, it means you care. He says, "Pray for an end to this war as soon as possible. Pray for justice and peace for Israeli's and Palestinians and for dignity and freedom for both." He said, share the story of what is happening on the ground. For example, he shared that thousands of Gazans were in the West bank working on farms and in agriculture on Israeli issued work permits. Immediately after the bombing, their work permits were cancelled by the Israeli government and they cannot go back to their homes and families in Gaza. They are stuck in place and have become refugees.

So we can pray. Paul urges Christians to pray when we are worried or anxious. He says, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

The promise of a posture of prayer with thanksgiving is a sense of peace that surpasses all human understanding. It may not take root right away, but don't give up on prayer.

We do have a lot to rejoice in today. First of all, we are here worshipping our God, who's very essence is love and wants dignity

and freedom for all. We celebrated the baptism of Danielle and her new life in Christ. We are celebrating Ardy Krueter and career of blessing all generations with the gift of music at Our Savior's. Thank you Ardy for your gifts and your love for the church.

And finally, we can rejoice in a God who doesn't abandon us when we suffer or when other's suffer. God is in the midst of all of it and laments with us. The cross tells us so. God will tirelessly work for justice and dignity and freedom for all. God will not rest and neither should we until peace becomes a reality on the ground for everyone.

But in the meantime, Christians are called to let our gentleness be made known to everyone? Let us ponder Jesus' words from the cross he said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do?"

Amen