

**“A PRISON CELL
AND A PEACEFUL HEART”
Text: Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 7:18-28**

The apostle Paul’s words to the Philippians ring true today: **“Do not be anxious about anything.”** Though their world was very much different from ours, the worries they faced likely mirrored our own: personal challenges like long work hours necessary to care for the family, job insecurity, affording necessities, worry about the future and conflict with others, balancing work and family life, or caring for elderly family members, and societal decay, the threat of persecution, personal health issues, financial hardship, marital difficulties, troubled relationships or dealing with the loss of a loved one. Yet, amidst these trials, Paul offers us a timeless message of peace and hope. Let’s embrace his words and find comfort in the knowledge that we aren’t alone—the Lord is near.

You know, add in the “busy-ness” of this season and its associated stressors to those I’ve already mentioned and we can understand why this time of year takes a significant toll on our mental well-being. This can also be time of loneliness, when the loss of loved ones is especially felt.

Many of us are feeling increasingly anxious, worried about life’s big questions and everyday challenges. The holiday season, with its pressure to be joyful and hopeful, can exacerbate these feelings. When our experiences don’t match the idealized holiday portrayed in movies or in the old Norman Rockwell style advertisements, we may question our own happiness and well-being. It’s important to remember that it’s okay to feel a range of emotions, including sadness and disappointment.

It’s no wonder so many people feel lost, confused, and depressed. If you’ve ever felt anxious or yearned for peace, you’re not alone.

Perhaps like the disciples of John the Baptist, we too often find ourselves anxious, especially when things seem uncertain. While John languished in prison, his disciples grew worried. Yet, John, though bold and prophetic, seemed remarkably at peace. He fearlessly called out sin, confidently proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, and trusted in God’s plan.

I see John as a wise, seasoned teacher guiding his students. When they came to him, anxious and full of questions, he calmly pointed them in the right direction. **“Go ask Jesus—go to the source,”** he said. **“Are you coming One, the Messiah we’ve been waiting for or should we look for someone else?”**

The answer to their question lies in Jesus’ miraculous works: **“The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”** These fulfill the prophecies of the Messiah. But Jesus’ miracles weren’t just about temporary relief. They were a glimpse of the ultimate goal: **to take away the sin of the world** through His sacrifice on the cross. While we may be drawn to the immediate benefits of His miracles, both John and Jesus point us to the heart of the matter.

Before John was imprisoned, he baptized countless people at the Jordan River. Among them were likely those suffering from physical ailments: the sick, the lame, the blind, and the outcast. But they sought more than physical healing. They yearned for the spiritual healing that only forgiveness of sins could bring. John was eager to point them to the true healer, Jesus, ***the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.***

Now that Jesus had come and begun His ministry, John the Baptist's role was complete. He had faithfully prepared the way. Jesus must increase and he, John must decrease, but did that mean he must die to decrease? Apparently so, but John was committed. In our text, Jesus paid him the ultimate compliment, declaring, ***“Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”*** Consider this: not Abraham, David, Elijah, or Moses, but John, a man imprisoned for his faith, was deemed the greatest. It's a testament to his unwavering devotion and powerful message.

But it's the next line that truly shifts our perspective: ***“Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”*** This puts our earthly obsessions into perspective. The people and things we admire, the status we crave—none of it can truly satisfy our deepest longings. Only the kingdom of God can provide the firm foundation we need for a life of peace and contentment, a life free from anxiety.

Jesus came to provide us with a firm foundation for a life of peace and contentment. He wants to anchor us so that we're not tossed about by every wave of life's challenges. Through baptism, we become members of God's kingdom, part of Christ's family. Our sins are forgiven, and the threat of death is conquered. As Romans 6:23 tells us, ***“The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** Through Christ, we are promised eternal life.

Imagine receiving the greatest Christmas gift imaginable, a gift you've longed for more than anything. You know for certain that it's yours, wrapped and waiting under the tree. Even though you have to wait, the anticipation fills you with joy. It's a similar experience with the gift of salvation. We know that eternal life is ours, secured by Jesus Christ. We may not fully possess it yet, but the promise of it brings us great joy.

As Christians, our eternal life in God's kingdom is secure. It's like a precious gift, purchased and wrapped, waiting for us to claim it on the last day. Though we might face challenges and setbacks, we can rest assured that our inheritance is safe, guarded by our loving Savior.

Knowing the incredible gift that awaits us changes how we live today. The joy of this future hope overshadows the trials and temptations Satan throws our way. Though he may try to distract us and drag us down, ***the Lord is near.*** He is not distant but intimately involved in our lives. Through His body and blood, we are healed and renewed. So, let's rejoice in the midst of life's challenges, knowing that our ultimate victory is assured. As Paul said, ***“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”***

Even John the Baptist, a mighty prophet, found himself imprisoned. It's unlikely he was thrilled about his situation! I'm sure he wasn't. But happiness isn't the same as joy. You might not feel particularly joyful right now, but your value in God's kingdom isn't determined by your feelings. Jesus declared your worth, and His Word endures forever.

I'm not sure how long John had been imprisoned when these events unfolded, but he was nearing the end of his earthly journey. Little did he know that his greatest moment was about to come, even as it would cost him his life.

Similarly, we may not know how close we are to our own ultimate reward. But as we wait, we can be assured that the Lord is near, ready to comfort and strengthen us. Let's bring our requests to God, expressing our needs and desires with gratitude/thanksgiving. By focusing on God's goodness and His ultimate victory, we can find peace and joy, even in the midst of trials.

And this gratitude isn't just a fleeting thought or emotion; it's a tangible action. The Greek word for "**thanksgiving**" is "eucharistia," which is also the name for the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist). In the midst of a world filled with anxiety, the Lord's Supper offers us a sanctuary of peace. It's a place where we confess our sins and receive God's forgiveness, where we hear His comforting Word, and where we pray together. Most importantly, it's a place where we celebrate the gift of Jesus Christ and partake of His life-giving body and blood.

So, "**rejoice in the Lord always**" and "**do not be anxious about anything**"? Paul isn't asking us to ignore our struggles but to embrace a different way of living, the way Jesus offers us. That's why we lit the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath today—a symbol of joy. As we near the end of Advent, our hearts should be filled with anticipation for the greatest gift of all.

Today, we'll gather to give thanks and receive God's gift in the sacrament of Holy Communion. It's a foretaste of the ultimate celebration, the day when we'll fully experience the joy of eternal life. In Jesus' name, Amen.