

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

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Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonika barely a generation after the death and resurrection of Christ. In this letter, believed to be the earliest of all Christian scripture, Paul wrote: “Always rejoice, pray incessantly, in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will toward you in the Anointed One Jesus.”

At this halfway point in Advent, we can’t help but to begin anticipating the joy of Christmas. And so, Paul prepares us with instructions on how to live while we wait in expectation. There’s no list of people headed for hell or people whose ticket to heaven has been pre-approved.

What Paul provides are clear, simple guidelines for living a life in Christ.

Live lives of incessant prayer. That’s a grace given by the Holy Spirit.

Live lives of gratitude. What Paul means is not the same as simply saying “thank you.” In the ancient Middle East, you said “thank you” to conclude a relationship. “Thank you” meant something more like “It’s been nice knowing you, but I no longer need you.” The way that people expressed *gratitude* was to take every opportunity to talk about the strong points of their benefactors.

And living out that expression of gratitude stimulates a life characterized by joy. Not happiness, really, and not pleasure or satisfaction. Joy. It’s a deeper emotion that comes from a heart widened by life. Joy, like prayer, is a fruit of the Spirit, one that is both experienced and expressed.

Prayer, gratitude, joy: these are revelations of graces that God has already granted.

We hear this reading from Paul’s letter on a day of prayerful, grateful and festal joy for the nearness of Christ. We express our joy through our devotion to God and make our gratitude known by sharing the blessings God has

granted. Some call this day “Rose Sunday,” when we light the rose-colored Advent candle. We also call this day “Gaudete Sunday.”

“Gaudete” is the first word of an introit that was traditionally sung on this day – a little snippet of music like the one on the cover of your bulletin. The word “gaudete” comes from the Latin, meaning “to rejoice.” And the verb form implies something like: “Rejoice, *all ya’ll!*”

Now, there’s one other element of the Christian life that makes Advent a bit different than the secular Christmas season that seems to begin with Veterans’ day sales and is creeping ever closer to Labor Day sales.

I wonder if you noticed that all our readings this morning are reminders to prayerfully and gratefully rejoice in the midst of loss, grief and suffering. Advent can become a resurgence or an intensifying experience of pain – for some, verging on hopelessness. And until you have lived through an Advent and Christmas season with a broken heart, you may not know how hard waiting for joy and gratitude and prayer can be.

Our scripture writers knew.

The author of First Isaiah describes his vocation as being sent “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to provide for those who mourn in Zion.” And we prayed with the psalmist and all those who remember happier times: “Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” We joined our prayers and hearts with those who ache to feel joyful again: “Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses of the Negev.”

And then we heard Paul’s letter to people waiting for the return of the crucified and risen Christ after some 20 years had already come and gone. As the people wait with fading expectations, Paul reminds them of the promise of the unseen grace of God with this gorgeous prayer: “May the God of peace himself make you holy with absolute completeness, and may the whole of you – spirit and soul and body – be preserved blamelessly at the arrival of our Lord Jesus the Anointed.”

You see, as ironic as it may seem, there is a depth of joy available to those who have known suffering. John’s Gospel story expands our awareness of God’s unseen, unexpected and already present grace. The

reading follows right on the heels of John's magnificent prologue that introduces us to John the Baptizer, sent from God to testify to the light that shines in the darkness, so that all people might come to trust the true light that illuminates everyone.

The light through which the Kosmos came to exist was in the Kosmos and the Kosmos did not recognize it. The Baptizer showed us that in our waiting and hoping and yearning, there is something hidden in plain sight. And so, when the Judeans question John, he diverts their entire line of inquiry. He directs them beyond himself and points to the light of Christ. John bewilders them with a phrase that appears nowhere else in our scripture: "Among you there stands one whom you do not know."

The light that John the Baptizer pointed out is *still* the source of prayerfully grateful rejoicing, if we will let ourselves see it. No matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, that light shines, often hidden in plain sight.

Let me tell you a story. A once-thriving monastery had fallen on hard times. They had no new postulants and no young novices. The few remaining monks were aging and rarely spoke with each other. Local people had stopped coming for prayer or for learning or spiritual direction.

Now, out in the woods on the edge of the monastery grounds, lived a wise old Hasidim – a rabbi – who walked the grounds to meditate and, from time to time, came into the monastery to pray.

One day, the deeply distraught abbot was out walking, pondering and praying over what to do when he saw the rabbi, and he decided open his heavy heart to the old man. As he walked up behind the rabbi, the rabbi turned to greet the abbot.

They fell into each other's arms like long-lost brothers and began to weep. The abbot knew he did not have to explain his brooding, so he simply asked one question: "Rebbe," the abbot said, "Can you give me a teaching that will help revive the monastery?"

The rabbi stroked his beard and lit his pipe. Finally, he looked at the abbot and said: "I will give you a teaching, but you can repeat it only once. After that, no one must ever say it out loud again."

"The Messiah," said the rabbi, "is among you."

The abbot nodded and walked back into the monastery, smiling for the first time in years. The monks gathered around him. "What did the rabbi say?" they asked. Slowly and carefully, the abbot gave them the rabbi's teaching: "He said, 'the Messiah is among you'."

"What could that mean?" the monks began to wonder. "Is it one of us? Is Brother Robert the Messiah? Is it Father Isaac? Could it be the abbot?"

Life at the monastery began to change. The monks began expecting to see the Messiah in each other's eyes, and hear the Messiah's voice in each other's words and chanting. A renewed warmth grew into an atmosphere of mutual regard that was difficult to describe but easy to notice.

Word began to spread, and before long people were coming again to be nourished by the lives of the monks and to experience the love radiating from them. People came again, seeking to become a part of the community, and the monastery grew and prospered for many years after.

Just so. The One who brings joy, the One who is the light of all people, is right here among us. The more we expect the light of Christ, the more whole the God of peace makes us – spirit and soul and body. And as we join God in reigniting that light in people who are suffering, the God of peace makes us holy with completeness.

We become resources for others when we are ready to relax our focus on our own wounding; when we are finally able to concentrate on seeking and serving the Christ in those around us. The restorative relief that opens our awareness to something beyond us is a gift of the Holy Spirit that makes whole and holy.

And it is in our created nature to respond to that gift by rejoicing. Living out our gratitude becomes irresistible. As we walk toward wholeness and holiness, our lives mature into compelling evidence of our benefactor the Holy One.

And so, on this Gaudete Sunday, we pray, we give thanks and we rejoice; The One who is among us is surely making us whole – spirit and soul and body. The faithful One who comes to us in this Eucharist is making us holy.

The Messiah is among us now. The Messiah is still coming.

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