

## *Serenity*

**Isaiah 12:2-6 (CEB)** God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won't be afraid. Yah, the LORD, is my strength and my shield; he has become my salvation." <sup>3</sup> You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation. <sup>4</sup> And you will say on that day: "Thank the LORD; call on God's name; proclaim God's deeds among the peoples; declare that God's name is exalted. <sup>5</sup> Sing to the LORD, who has done glorious things; proclaim this throughout all the earth." <sup>6</sup> Shout and sing for joy, city of Zion, because the holy one of Israel is great among you.

**Philippians 4:4-7(CEB)** <sup>4</sup> Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Don't be anxious about anything; rather bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. <sup>7</sup> Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

## *Serenity*

Paul's words are so poetic, so comforting – until you think about them. Rejoice in the Lord always? What does that mean? Is this some sort of command about acceptable worship style? Are we in trouble because we don't have a praise band? And what about this peace that passes all understanding? These are beautiful concepts. We like to hear these phrases. But, we aren't likely to think that they're very realistic.

What is this peace that Paul is talking about? If it surpasses all understanding, is it just some mystery that we shouldn't even consider, because we can't possibly comprehend it? Remember that Paul is a scholar of the Hebrew writings. He was trained by one of the most respected rabbis of that day. So when he uses the word peace he is using it as a Jew steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. When he says peace, he's talking about *shalom*. This isn't merely the absence of conflict. This is the harmony that comes from having all of life in its proper place and function. Chaos is disorder; *shalom* is restored order. This is harmony in every aspect of life.

What so many people don't realize is that God wants them to be happy. Many of us think that church is all about keeping us from doing what we're not supposed to do. And when we feel that way, we never feel good enough. What we overlook is God's grace and God's bounty. We're so busy feeling guilty and ashamed that we find it hard to experience joy.

We forget that these encouraging words from Paul come in the middle of a stressful situation. In Philippi, there was strife between two of their leaders, and there was argument about doctrine. On top of that, the words come from someone who has the chains of prison wrapped around him. Paul wrote this encouragement to rejoice while he was sitting in a cell of a dark Roman prison. When we read Paul's exhortation to rejoice always, our reaction is likely to be, "Rejoice? Really? Do you know what my day was like?" But Paul does know. He knows about being hated and harassed. He knows about torture and the threat of death. But he writes of rejoicing and peace. This Christian sort of peace is non-rational, perhaps beyond being rational, or maybe even irrational. It's a peace that finds its complete fulfillment both within, and, somewhere beyond the realm of human reason. In effect, Paul says rejoice in the Lord, because prosperity and happy times and other potential reasons for rejoicing can't be counted on to be consistent and continual, but God can be counted on.

After telling us to rejoice all of the time and that there's some sort of un-understandable peace and harmony to be had, Paul says, "Don't be anxious about anything." He's rotting in a Roman prison and he says, "Don't be anxious?" Has Paul lost his ever-loving mind? Paul suggests that prayer is the answer to anxiety. He says, "Don't be anxious, but offer thanksgiving in everything by prayer and supplication. Now, Paul and Peter had their disagreements, but they agreed about this. First Peter 5:7 says, "cast all your anxiety on him, for he cares about you." This isn't about giving God a wish list. This is about praying with extreme humility and with great thanksgiving.

The word translated pray could be more precisely translated as “pray toward.” Our prayer should be focused on, or toward, the one to whom we pray. We shouldn't get so hung up on when we should pray or what form or phrases ought to be present to make our prayers conform to some sort of rules or traditions. Focus on who you are praying to. Paul urges them to pray with gratitude and in all circumstances. This is only possible if we remember that we've already received God's greatest gift. In our focus on ourselves, our problems, our fears and our rights, it's easy to forget that we are not our own. In life and death we belong to God. A bit of humility is helpful. In chapter two, Paul writes, "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. <sup>7</sup> But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave. (Philippians 2:5-7 CEB)

If Christ Jesus considered humanity's need more important than his own divine status, then we ought to respond to our own strife and struggle by giving priority to others. This is what Paul did. Chained up in prison, he turned his attention to a church that he loved, but also a church that had tension and argument going on. He gave them the only help he could, given his situation. He advised them to, "Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near." Other translations for gentleness include magnanimity and consideration for others. And these words describe outward relationships, not just our inward feeling. You aren't gentle, unless you're gentle to someone. You can't be magnanimous by yourself. Being considerate isn't a solitary virtue.

Paul said, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." This isn't a matter of blowing your own horn. This isn't about seeking praise and recognition. It's about caring and compassion. It's focused on the action and the recipient. I studied theology with the daughter of a very well-known Siri Lankan minister, D. T. Niles. He famously said, “Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” Gospel joy is always shared joy.

True joy is a far cry from the temporary joy or rush that comes from getting the season's latest toy, whether that be a “Furby” or a new car. One key to rejoicing, in finding joy, is to avoid focusing on our individual pursuit of happiness as an end in itself. Real joy comes from real peace, peace that is *shalom*, peace that is the sweet fragrance of harmony in our life. An important element in finding peace is in sharing peace in little everyday moments, in casual meetings, even in traffic. The only way we will ever experience *shalom*, true peace, is one small act of peace at a time, and welcoming the One who comes to us, the One who lived a life of peace, the Prince of Peace, the one who truly understands our lives.

The peace of God surpasses all understanding. It's so counterintuitive. It isn't something that we acquire. We can't buy it. There's no program or formula to follow in order to achieve it. It isn't something that we can get. But when we turn our attention outward, when we live lives of gentleness, compassion, and generosity, we still don't achieve or acquire peace – it's given to us! It is in giving that we receive – and we can't seem to get our minds around that. So, it's no wonder that the peace, the *shalom*, the harmony of life that comes as God's blessing, surpasses all understanding.

The prophet Isaiah felt the incomprehensible peace of God. The only possible reaction is to rejoice, just like Paul urged centuries later. Isaiah said, "God has become our salvation; trust and don't be afraid. Draw water with joy from the springs of salvation. Thank the LORD. Sing to the LORD, who has done glorious things. The holy one of Israel is among us." Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,  
Go to love and serve the Lord,  
showing mercy to all.