

Joy and Peace

Philippians 4:4 and Romans 15:13

In his 1992 book, *Laugh Again*, Chuck Swindoll wrote, “I know of no greater need today than the need for joy. Unexplainable, contagious joy. Outrageous joy. When that kind of joy comes aboard our ship of life, it brings good things with it—like enthusiasm for life, determination to hang in there, and a strong desire to be of encouragement to others. Such qualities make our voyage bearable when we hit the open seas and encounter high waves of hardship that tend to demoralize and paralyze. There is nothing better than a joyful attitude when we face the challenges life throws at us.” Although those words were written some twenty-eight years ago, they are especially appropriate today as the high waves of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic continue to cause hardships for many people. For some, these hardships include illness and even death. Fortunately, the wave of this particular hardship has not yet directly crashed upon the ship we know as First Cumberland; nonetheless, there remains a cautious fear of the lethal wave. Though we have been spared the hardship of illness and death, this medical tsunami has forced us to cancel all church-sponsored activities, created uncertain economic conditions, and generally disrupted our lives in more ways than I can count. How can we possibly have joy under these circumstances, under these hardships? Studying about joy in Scripture helps build an understanding of how to put ourselves in places where it is possible to find and maintain an attitude of joy in our journey of life in spite of the storms. With this in mind, I call our attention to our two Scripture texts for today, recorded in **Philippians 4:4** and **Romans 15:13**.

To find joy in the midst of a global pandemic means putting ourselves in a position to experience laughter and joy. Laughing at those who are suffering is disrespectful and wrong, but laughing and experiencing joy in the midst of troubled times is not ill-mannered; in fact, laughter and joy are God-given coping mechanisms designed to help us through tough times. Multiple studies reveal that laughter reduces pain, increases job performance, connects people emotionally, and improves the flow of oxygen to the heart and brain. Laughter, it is said, is the best medicine. A good belly laugh can both make us feel better and reduce our stress level. In an effort to make you laugh or at least smile, I want to share a few actual bulletin bloopers. “The Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles, and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.” “The Ladies’ Bible Study will be held Thursday morning at ten o’clock. All ladies are invited to lunch in the Fellowship Hall after the B.S. is done.” “The Pastor would appreciate it if the ladies of the congregation would lend him their electric girdles for the pancake breakfast next Sunday morning.” “Ushers will eat latecomers.” “The third verse of ‘Blessed Assurance’ will be sung without musical accomplishment.” “For those of you who have children and do not know it, we have a nursery downstairs.” Okay, maybe these bloopers made you moan instead of laugh, but at least we are moving in the right direction.

I am convinced that true joy and lasting peace are elusive unless they come from the Lord, but unfortunately, so many people seek these things elsewhere. In spite of their popularity, these erroneous attempts only offer temporary or illusionary joy and peace; this type of joy and peace never lasts and are woefully insufficient in the midst of a global pandemic. Some sought joy and

peace in their financial resources, then the stock market crashed under the wave of fear produced by the pandemic and their joy and peace were washed away. Others sought joy and peace in their careers, but the “Safer at Home” order gradually eroded that away, as well. Any place other than Christ that we seek joy and peace will ultimately disappoint us.

In our text for today, as well as in several other places in the *New Testament*, the Apostle Paul tells us that we can have joy and peace when we fully trust in Jesus; in fact, we can have these things so much that they overflow. If these things are available to us as followers of the risen Jesus, then why do so many people seem not to possess them? The answer to this question is multifaceted, but I think that, generally speaking, we all tend to trust in what we see in front of us. By that, I mean that we let current and urgent circumstances, like the ongoing pandemic, rob of us of the joy and peace God has planned for us. So many people, even people in the church, hold onto an immediate worry and forget about God’s promises.

All of this leads to the following question: “How can we be filled with joy and peace, how can we rejoice always, even in the midst of a storm?” First of all, we need to slow down and carefully look around. Telling someone to slow down while under a “Safer at Home” order seems foolish, but hear me out. I do not know about you, but besides not being able to worship together on Sunday mornings, the worst thing for me during this pandemic has been my lack of productive activity. I am wired in such a way that I am frustrated by being idle. For me, at least initially, our pandemic-inspired slowdown has been like being stuck in a traffic jam on the interstate while having no clue when the traffic flow would begin to move again. I am now beginning to realize that my frustration was not rooted in my idleness, but rather, in my failure to be observant and appreciative during my down time. Scripture never encourages us to sit and be idle, but it does tell us to be still and know that God is God [**Psalm 46:10**]. Sitting and doing nothing is both frustrating and boring to me, but pausing the pursuits of life to read God’s Word and ponder its meaning, to spend time in prayer and meditation, to count my many blessing, to read a good book, to visit with my family instead of merely watching television while sitting beside them allows God’s gifts of joy and peace to be made manifest in my life, and it will do the same in yours. Who knows, pausing to look around while life as we knew has come to a stop may result in us seeing wonderful things we have never seen before because we have been going too fast; this may ultimately be the greatest blessing to come out of this pandemic. Yes a blessing can come from tragedy, for **Romans 8:28** tells us that “. . . ***in all things God works for good with those who love him, . . .***” [GNT]

Another way we can be filled with joy and peace and rejoice always, even in the midst of a storm, is to trust in the goodness of God. In a fallen and troubled world, it is natural to be a pessimist. If we are a worrier by nature, then we expect the worse even when things are going good and believe that any and every storm will assuredly turn into a tornado or a hurricane. I am not a worrier by nature and am generally optimistic, so I struggle to relate to those who constantly worry; nonetheless, I offer this advice: Live as if God is on your side and believe that His ways and His plans are perfect for you. Years ago, I adopted **Jeremiah 29:11** as the theme verse of

my ministry; this verse says: ***“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’*** [NIV] This promise rests squarely on the goodness of God.

At the beginning of the message I mentioned yet another way we can be filled with joy and peace and rejoice always, even in the midst of a storm, and that way is to learn to laugh again. We laughed a lot as children; what happened? I spent last weekend with three of my grandchildren and they laughed a lot. They made up the lamest “knock, knock jokes” you can imagine and then laughed like they were actually funny. They made silly faces just to see an old man laugh. When they did these things, they forgot about skinned-knees and bruised egos and simply enjoyed themselves. In **Ecclesiastes 3:4**, Solomon tells us that there is ***“. . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; . . .”*** [NRSV] The ongoing pandemic will eventually pass; all storms do, so stop weeping and laugh. Do not laugh at the expense of others, but as I indicated earlier, God created us to laugh. Stop taking this life so seriously all the time. No matter what our circumstances, even death, God is still in control.

I want to quickly share two more ways for us to be filled with joy and peace and rejoice always, even in the midst of a storm, the first of which is to encourage others. **First Thessalonians 5:11** instructs us to ***“. . . encourage one another and build up each other, . . .”*** [NRSV] When we think of others more than ourselves we quit worrying about ourselves. The final way I want to mention is to stop playing the “What If” game. What if the pandemic gets worst now that people are going back to work; what if I lose my job; what if the test results are bad; what if the church never resumes? We can easily lose our joy and peace when we play the “What If” game, so leave that responsibility to others, to our Session, to our local, state, and federal leaders, to God. When we continuously play the “What If” game we take on worries that are above our pay-grade. The Apostle Paul wrote, in **Philippians 4:6**, ***“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”*** [NRSV]

Let us pray together: Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, and most precious Holy Spirit; we pray for all who are suffering because of the coronavirus pandemic, may they know Your healing power. When we are afraid for either ourselves or our loved ones, give us Your strength and courage. When we feel alone and isolated during this slow down, reassure us with a sense of Your presence. When all we want to do is weep and worry, fill us with Your joy and peace so that we can laugh again. Give wisdom to those in authority and keep us safe as closed businesses begin to reopen and furloughed people go back to work. We give You thanks for those who care for the sick and suffering and ask that You keep them safe. We ask all this in the name of Jesus, our Healer and Protector, Amen.

Pastor Mike

Knoxville First Cumberland Presbyterian Church
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