BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

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Reflecting on Joy (Philippians 4:1-9)

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I remember being on a youth camp when I was in year 12 singing 'I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy deep in my heart deep in my heart to stay', and I wondered do I? What is joy? I don't really feel it, am I really a Christian then? A bit like when a Bishop who used to ask, 'Are you happy? Very happy?' and I said, 'I don't do happy but I do do peaceful or content'. Happy seemed to him a measure of faith. What is it with these emotions? What is it with being a Christian? Is it any different from any other way of being? Or more to do with our own personality and values? Yes, I have felt moments of joy, or maybe I would call it delight, in the world around and the birth of a child, even in the dying of someone at peace, in a new relationship, in an old relationship, in beauty. Yet, Paul's letter to the Philippians speaks of joy quite a lot, and, it is really important to note, that Paul writes this letter, characterised by joy, to the church he started in the Greek city of Philippi at the end of his life. Specifically, biblical scholars believe Paul writes this letter from prison in Rome and further, while awaiting his execution. Thus, it is in the experience of suffering, both imprisonment and impending death, that Paul chooses to speak of joy.[1]

Paul encourages his audience: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice"[2]. This sentence alone captures the two key topics of the letter, namely joy and theological focus. Indeed, Paul opened his letter with remarks that he is "constantly praying with joy" (1:4); he goes on to mention "joy in faith" (1:25) and wants the Philippians to "make my joy complete" by having the same

[1] https://stjuliansaustin.org/latest-happenings/rejoice-in-the-lord-always-sermon-for-proper-24-philippians-41-9 Scott Hoetze

[2] Philippians 4:4

intent and mind (2:2). At the beginning of this chapter, Paul calls the congregation in Philippi "my joy and crown".[3]
What is this all about? Why say this? Sometimes it is important to remind us of our focus, God, and looking toward the good.

I remember, years ago, waltzing around the Town Hall with my partner at a Bush Ball, totally present, flowing, in sync, experiencing such exhilarating joy!

When Paul says to us today, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Always! Really, is that possible? Rejoice, *in the Lord,* how?
Maybe, it could be that joy is linked with a desire for something more, for God? I wonder whether it is a knowing or tapping into in the present, something more, something deeper, meaning, purpose, peace in the fragility. It is not something that can be manufactured or fabricated. It has to be authentic, an experience arising from somewhere deep within, but perhaps we can open to it a bit by leaning into the Divine? Trusting?

Let me tell you about an encounter that for me expresses joy. It is the story of the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth. An older woman shunned by society for her infertility, pregnant, and a teenager unwed and newly pregnant, meet. The image is one of joy and movement, these two outsiders embrace and the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. This image for me communicates more than community. It points to communion, a deep spiritual connection. There is the physicality of touch. There is the movement of Spirit. There is delight. There is friendship. There is sharing in a common experience, arms entwined, bellies touching, sheer joy and relief, and the seriousness of something more.

But, both joy and sorrow, are facts of life, aren't

[3] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-5

they? Every life, including, each of ours knows both. In fact, both can be known in more or less the same moment. I've felt both joy and deep sadness at the time of a death, a gratitude, and sadness, a peace, intertwined. Perhaps it could be said that love is empowered, and fills our life with purpose and meaning *because* it is so very vulnerable.[4] Scott Hoetze suggests that God is revealed when joy is discovered within the great paradox of vulnerable love. He suggests that God is known when joy is found in the intermingling of love and suffering. [5]

Try inhabiting joy..

It seems what Paul is proposing, at least, in part is that we do have some agency around joy. We can choose joy. Philosopher and Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl, in his seminal work, *Man's Search for Meaning* writes, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a [man] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."
Choosing joy, does not magically make suffering go away, but it does lead to hope rather than despair. It does allow us to begin to dream about what can and will be beyond our present circumstances. It does lead to a generous life and not a bitter one.

Former rector of Christchurch Saint Lawrence, as he was dying became lighter and lighter and seemed to me, almost transparent and full of light and joy. I'll never forget him.

The second key focus of Philippians is theological and Christological, that real and lasting joy comes from the confidence that, no matter what happens, we are inseparably connected to God. It has to do with where the focus of one's life is or, as Paul Tillich says, with one's "ultimate concern," perhaps in seeing the bigger picture.[6]

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[4] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-5

[5] https://stjuliansaustin.org/latest-happenings/rejoice-in-the-lord-always-sermon-for-proper-24-philippians-41-9 Scott Hoetze

[6] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-5

Paul urges two women leaders to get on, to put aside their differences and focus on God and he urges their peers to support them.

Jesu Joy of man's' desiring wrote JS Bach. Such beautiful uplifting words and music. What is this Joy thing? What is the connection with the divine, with God? Surely we can have joy without God? I'm sure that we can but maybe it is something about a deeper joy, a deeper hope when there is a trust in God and a knowing that God has our back that God is behind us before us beside us underneath us above us. I'm not sure but maybe having that hope, that faith, particularly in trying times like Paul in prison and about to be persecuted, we are able, to somehow acknowledge the tough stuff and yet at the same time trust and hope that no matter what happens 'all will be well', as Julian of Norwich said during the Black Plague. That must be particularly hard if you are in a war-zone and seeing your country in rubble.
So joy, joy in my dying time? I suppose that comes from knowing I've done all that I can and that there is nothing left to do, or even if there is something left to do being able to release that and rest into my dying? What about in birthing? In days of tiredness and endless demands, is joy possible? I guess, at least there you can see the possibility of a future. As you can see, I'm still grappling with this joy business and the rejoicing that Paul encourages us to at all times..

It seems to me that joy is an acceptance of the way things are. It's a non grasping experience, a broader context, where you can relax into the reality because of faith in God, neither sentimental nor triumphalist, but accepting and embracing what is.

Noel Davis' poem, *My Angel Says to Me* invites us into joy, to 'live the sparkle [or joy] of each new day.'

My Angel Says to Me
be a lover of life
the focus of heart lifts the spirit.

Your body may be ageing
feeling more worn and weary
muscle aches more persistent
manual efforts more paced
memory less agile

morning risings slower
But with a love of life
spirit becomes more supple, robust,
resilient and free
divested of inherited attitudes
that feed resignation
wear you out
steal your energy.

Rise up on eagles wings
*your spirit is free.**

Be a lover of life.
Dance all its seasons.
You are not resigned to fade
but live the sparkle of each new day.

*Isaiah 41.31