

Advent marks the beginning of the church year. Over the next few weeks, we look forward to the birth of Christ, a tiny flicker on the horizon that represents new life and new beginnings.

Advent also provides us with an opportunity to look back over the previous twelve months, just as some of us do at the end of the secular year. How was God present in our lives? What did we accomplish? Where did we stumble, and how can we learn from our mistakes?

This past year was unquestionably a challenge for everyone, albeit in different ways. More than several of our church members contracted Covid, one of whom is still in recovery. Others experienced tremendous loss, economic hardship, and the continuation of serious health issues.

For me as a pastor, the biggest challenge was undoubtedly our safe transition back to in-person worship. Across the country, division over how to worship (online or in-person), including whether congregants should be required to wear masks, has been one of several factors contributing to what *Sojourners* magazine calls the “**Great Resignation**” among pastors. In **poll data** collected recently by the Barna Group, about 38 percent of Protestant senior pastors surveyed have considered resigning over the past year. Among pastors under age 45, that number rose to an astounding 46 percent. Many of these pastors are weary of the in-fighting and the discord among members of their congregation, and so they look to other careers.

One of the many reasons I am **NOT** among those who have considered resigning has been the way in which this congregation has handled returning to worship in-person. In working with our council, our re-opening task force, and in receiving input from members at large, I quickly realized that we were “of one mind” (Philippians 1:27) when it came to making **safety**, especially with regard to the most vulnerable among us, our **highest priority**.

Together, we **gave life** to the words of Paul in his Letter to the Philippians. “Let each of you look not to your own interests,” he writes, “but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). This fundamental commitment led to the precautions we have taken which, while cumbersome, have enabled us safely to gather again, to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and song, and to receive the food of forgiveness in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

In short, we did it! Thank you to all of you have helped along the way and who continue to help. Let us also give thanks to the Lord our God for the inspiration to live for one another instead of simply for ourselves. You ask where Christ is in the world. He is here!

We will have more things for which to be grateful in the months that lie ahead: the return of acolytes to our weekly worship services, several baptisms, and adult forums featuring a prominent member of our city council as well as a nationally acclaimed author in January. But for now, let us take a moment to look back and be grateful for the good things God has provided.

Paul's Expression of Gratitude

I am glad the editors of the lectionary chose Philippians 1:3-11 as our second lesson for today. Perhaps they selected it because entering a new church year, as I said, provides us with the opportunity to look back, to be grateful for the ways in which God has guided and sustained us, in good times and in bad.

I like how Paul begins this section of the letter by talking about his gratitude for the ministry he and the Philippians **share**. As one commentary points out, "In Greek as in English [this term, sometimes translated as 'partnership'] connotes both fellowship and a financial sharing in business enterprise" (Interpreters' One-Volume Commentary on the Bible, p. 847). Paul and his fellow Philippians are literally and figuratively *invested* in the ministry they share. This is especially evident in the support they give Paul.

What is Paul's situation, exactly? Do you remember? Philippians 2:7 provides the answer. Paul was in prison. This was not a place where the guilty went for punishment. In the first century, people would go to prison to await their verdict and sentence, which could range anywhere between execution and exoneration. There they would wait, sometimes for extensive periods of time.

In prison, moreover, the "state" provided nothing. As Carla Works of Wesleyan Theological Seminary observes, "The Philippians have invested in Paul's ministry – even during times of uncertainty. Since prisoners were at the mercy of their family and friends to provide basic needs, the church sent Epaphroditus with goods for Paul during his imprisonment" (*Working Preacher*, 12/5/21).

No wonder Paul was grateful. The Philippians were keeping him alive!

Of course, Paul's gratitude extended well beyond the support he had been receiving. He was also for the way in which God was working through his situation, how even in these circumstances God could take an obstacle (imprisonment) and turn it into an opportunity (preaching the gospel to the Roman guard). Indeed, Paul had infiltrated "the ranks of the ranks of those who maintain the hegemony of the empire. This success can only be met by joy" (*ibid.*).

Let Us Learn from Paul

What can we learn from Paul when it comes to joy? How can we maintain his attitude of gratitude, moreover, when we find ourselves in undesirable circumstances? How is

it that Paul can repeatedly rejoice (the term “joy” appears sixteen times in the letter) even in chains?

Works has a great answer. “The apostle can have joy in the midst of suffering because of his confidence in God’s work through Christ. His joy is wed to God’s activity rather than to his own personal circumstances. Joy is an appropriate theological response. It is not joy because of suffering, but joy because those who cause the suffering will not have the last word” (*ibid.*).

Think about this for a moment.

The return of Christ, as I suggested last Sunday, was not something for Paul or the Philippians to be **feared**. It was the source of **great joy**, one where God would bring to completion the work of the Philippians, and where their love – which distinguished them from the society around them – would “overflow with knowledge and full insight” (see Philippians 1:6, 9).

Yet Paul had even more than hope in Christ’s return. His joy was in what God was doing now, how God was empowering him **in his weakness** (see 2 Corinthians 12:9) to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, to stand up, to resist non-violently. How? Because, as I suggested several weeks ago, Paul learned in his moments of weakness to lean on God for his strength – and we are called to do the same.

Our Joy Today

Do you struggle like I do with being joyful in the midst of difficult, painful, or even impossible circumstances? It is certainly natural if you do. After all, experiencing joy when the situation dictates otherwise is paradoxical and counter-intuitive. But as Paul shows, it is possible.

The question is how.

Paul, we have learned, was able to distinguish the objective situation from his personal circumstances. Even while in prison, even while tortured, and even while in pain, Paul could see the work God was doing around him through his ministry. When we find ourselves fearful, say, of the church’s future or of finances, can we likewise look around us and affirm what God is doing among us.

It is difficult, but with the Spirit’s help, are not all things possible? I see these same challenges too, but when I look out at you now, I have an immense feeling of gratitude and joy that wells up within me. Beyond our unity in making safety the first priority upon returning to in-person worship, I am grateful to you for so many things: for the care and support you have given me over the duration of my mother’s battle with cancer; for the incredible outpouring of thanksgiving last week during our Processional Offering, for the way you remind me that we are a family, for the humor and grace so many of you bring, and for the way you care for each other and reach out beyond our walls to those in need.

I am also grateful for the many volunteers who selflessly contribute their time to our ministry, and I am grateful to our staff, to Barb in whom I could not have asked for a better parish administrator, to John who works with Rich to keep our grounds in order and our building safe, and to Kyle, whose gift for music finds perfect expression in his desire to serve others, and who should be awarded a medal for helping me refine my chanting, all in the hope that one day I will transition from a baritone back to the true nature of my voice, namely, tenor.

In all these things, I give thanks.

God Among Us

Advent marks the beginning of the church year, a time where we anticipate with joy the birth of Christ and with it the prospect for new beginnings. It also provides us with an opportunity to look back over the previous twelve months. We may wonder what we accomplished or how we stumbled, what we can learn and where we need to offer or receive forgiveness.

For all of that, Paul teaches another way. His joy was wed to God's activity rather than to his own personal circumstances. We can do the same by turning our focus to the ways in which God has been present in our ministry, even when we find ourselves personally struggling or when the church finds itself facing difficulties or hardship.

How do you think God has been at work among us? In what ways, led by the Spirit, has our ministry made a difference in our lives or in the lives of others, especially those in need?

May God give us the strength that Paul received to find joy even in the harsh realities of life and in places we least expect, surprising us with the joy that comes from above and enabling us to bring joy to the lives of others.

In Jesus' name.

Amen