

JOY TO THE WORLD

[based on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24]

A woman was sitting on her living room couch one day when a black snake slithered past. Being deathly afraid of snakes, she dashed to the bathroom to get her husband from the shower.

He grabbed a towel and tied it around his waist, then rushed into the living room with a broom. Using the handle, he began to poke under the couch trying to get the snake out.

The sleeping family dog woke up and wondered what all the commotion was about. He touched his nose to the back of the man's foot. Thinking he had been bitten by the snake, the man jumped and passed out.

His wife, believing her husband had had a heart attack, called 911. The ambulance paramedics who arrived shortly afterward, hurried in and placed the husband on a stretcher. As they carried him out, the snake reappeared from under the couch.

One attendant who was also deathly afraid of snakes, dropped the stretcher and ran. The husband then fell onto the floor and broke his leg. Seeing how badly his leg was twisted, caused the wife to faint. The remaining attendant watched as the snake slithered out the open front door. It was just one of those days!

Have you ever had "one of those days"? You know, those days when you "wake up on the wrong side of the bed," marking the beginning of a chain of events that go downhill from there? Nothing seems to work out...everything is a mess, chaotic, and fails.

Sometimes it's not merely "one of those days," it continues relentlessly on, and becomes "one of those weeks," or worse yet, "one of those months," or even, an "annus horribilis", to quote the late Queen Elizabeth. Isn't there a country song that states, "If it wasn't for back luck, I'd have no luck at all"?

However, we Christians are not superstitious; we do not believe in bad or good luck. Ours is a faith, a trust in God who has a purpose for all things in life - good, bad, or otherwise, whether we understand it or not.

The apostle Paul admonishes all would-be followers of Jesus, listing several attitudes and behaviours, necessary for the health and well-being of any individual or congregation.

The one that immediately jumped out at me, was the opening verse of the lesson; it says a tremendous amount in only three words: "Always be joyful." As I reflected on those few instructive words of Paul, in relation to what he says along with them, the first thing that struck me was that I personally do not live up to these words. I fail miserably some days.

How is anyone able to *always* be joyful? It seems, at face value, an impossible task or attitude to reach. Yet, this is the third Sunday in Advent, in the old days, referred to as Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin, meaning to rejoice. The focus today is that of joy. Yet, we struggle with that, don't we?

So again, I pose the question, "how is it possible to be full of joy all the time?" Bad, and even evil things happen to people, including us. Is Paul some naive, head-in-the-clouds dreamer, when he challenges us to "always be joyful"? Is his instruction here so heavenly-minded that it's of no earthly benefit to us?

In one respect, I would answer yes...and no. Yes, Paul was an intellectual giant of the early church and he was inclined to be idealistic at times. Yes, in the sense that Paul, for a time, probably believed that Jesus was coming for a second time..."soon and very soon". It seems that Paul expected Jesus to return in his lifetime.

I would also answer no, Paul was *not* some overly naive, head-in-the-clouds dreamer. Nor was he totally heavenly-minded when he instructs the Thessalonians (and us), to "always be joyful." He was a man who knew the ways of this world, and learned much in his life, through the school of hard knocks. Much of his instruction to Gentile congregations, is full of practical wisdom and the complexities of human relationships.

What Paul is **not** doing here when he challenges his readers to always be joyful, is to lay a guilt trip on us. He is not pressuring us into being joyful **or else! No!** That's not what Paul means at all. He is not clobbering us over the head or stuffing joy down our throats with the law.

Unfortunately for some Christians, there may be considerable negative baggage around joy. Instead of joy being a precious gift to us, it becomes an oppressive monster, insisting that one is not a Christian, unless they are always feeling happy and joyful. This attitude is a misinterpretation of true joy and rejoicing. It seems to me that it produces a phony, shallow, hypocritical joy, which is useless when the going gets tough.

True joy, true rejoicing, is much deeper than that. It is not based only on our feelings, since our feelings are always up and down...they come and go, depending on whatever situation in life we find ourselves. True joy, and being able to rejoice always, **is a gift** - it comes from Christ.

I think Paul makes that quite clear when we read and interpret verse 16 of our text in light of the whole passage, especially verse 24, where he states: "God, who called you to become His child, will do all this for you, just as He promised." Only with Christ's help are we able to always be joyful. True rejoicing then, is knowing and trusting and celebrating Christ's *presence* with us always.

If he is with us always, then we can indeed be joyful, because no matter what happens - good, bad, or in-between, Christ is with us, to see us through it. Paul is not asking us to give thanks FOR the tough times, just to do so IN them. Practicing a behaviour makes it permanent. By regularly handing our will over to God, we soon discover that life not only is worth living, but bursting at the seams with meaning and fulfillment.

Being full of joy always, is being able to "bloom where we're planted." It is knowing and accepting our place, our calling in life. It is living in relationship with Christ each day, and valuing that relationship more than anything else. I'm sure that you know what I'm talking about.

For example, all of us have met people who do their job well, even efficiently, and as far as the basic functions and requirements of their work, they may be quite competent. Yet, there seems to be something missing. Maybe it's that look in their eyes which betrays them. They seem to lack joy; they seem restless; they give others the impression that their heart is just not in it.

But then there's the flip-side of the coin. That person who not only does their job well, efficiently and competently, but thrives in their work; is stimulated by it; thoroughly enjoys it; and inspires other people's lives because of their joy.

That doesn't always mean they're always bubbling over with an eternal smile or light-hearted laugh, but it does mean they reflect to others, a contentment with their lot - a strength, even in their quiet, gentle presence, that no one can shatter or destroy. They point us to Christ and the gift of joy that he offers every one of us, whatever the circumstances.

I love the story about a small boy in a pew at church. He turns around and smiles a huge grin. He looks from person to person with a smile stretching all the way back to those in the back pew. He isn't gurgling, spitting, humming, tearing apart the hymnbooks, or rummaging through his mother's purse. He is just smiling. Suddenly, his mother jerks him around, and with a stage whisper that everyone can hear, she says, "Stop grinning, you're in church!" With that, she gives him a slap on his backside, and as the tears roll down his cheeks she adds, "That's better."

Friends, how appropriate that this little boy innately understood the meaning of true joy, and you can just imagine, in your mind's eye, that everyone who met his gaze, smiled back...more contagious than Covid!

So, on this Gaudete Sunday, may the gift of joy, and the ability to "rejoice always", be given, shared and celebrated among us, as we look forward to the birth of that baby in a manger, the source of all joy, and so much more!

AMEN