

Prayer of Preparation

Jesus, you're the center of my joy. All that's good and perfect comes from you. You're the heart of my contentment and hope for all I do; Jesus, you're the center of my joy.

Philippians 4 is one of the most often quoted scripture verses; Philippians 4 and Jeremiah 29. Both passages of scripture are so misquoted that it makes me cringe when I see them on t-shirts, mugs, social media posts, and so on. In today's "quote a day society," where scripture is transformed to suit us rather than where we are transformed to be who God calls us to be in scripture, we've lost the reality of who Paul was, where Paul was, and what Paul was really telling us.

Here's the reality: Paul is in prison. A for real Roman prison where he's in chains, his meals are a gift of grace, and his every breath is at the whim of the Roman governor. For those of you who work in prisons, you know exactly what Paul is going through so the glossy picture that society uses to portray Paul's letter to the Philippians is simply wrong, to put it nicely, and a bold-faced lie for those of us who are much more plain spoken.

I want you to hear Paul again with a fresh ear. I want you to hear the Paul whose home, is dwelling was a prison, Paul who is in chains, the Paul who is locked away, the Paul who awaits the mercy of outside world to provide meals for him, the Paul who knows that his next breath is dependent on the whim of the governor, the Paul whose well-being in prison is dependent on the guards at the door, and the Paul whose concern is not his own circumstances but those of the Christian community to whom he writes. Hear Paul again, with a fresh ear:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul is telling us:

- When our home is literal, mental, or spiritual prison...***dwell in joy.***
- Chained to the ground...***dwell in joy.***
- At the mercy of someone else's good will for your next meal... ***dwell in joy.***
- Next breath dependent on someone who doesn't know who God is... ***dwell in joy.***
- Our physical well-being is tied to a system which would rather kill us than see us whole and healthy... ***dwell in joy.***
- Feeling forgotten by those we love the most dearly... ***dwell in joy.***

We like to believe that the gospel was forged in some fairy tale land by people who lived fairy tale lives but it's simply not true. Ask Paul. Ask Paul as he's chained and awaiting death for spreading the gospel if his life is a fairy tale. Ask Paul as he waits for someone to bring him food. Ask Paul as he waits for someone to bring him water, ask Paul as he waits for someone to bring him clean clothes, toilet paper, and a toothbrush. Ask Paul as he waits for someone who will come to visit him with a word of care and compassion. Ask Paul and he will tell you that no matter where we are, we are called to ***dwell in joy***.

Paul is telling us that in no uncertain terms our lives is tied to a gospel who sees the world exactly as it is, rejects it whole-heartedly, and says there is a God in heaven who sees and hears us yet tells us to count it as all joy because Christ has come. Brother and sisters in Christ, family of God, Paul tells us that we are called to ***dwell in joy*** no matter who we are, where we are, and what is going on in our lives.

I remember when I came to Grace at the end of the BOD 213 committee meeting. You had a decision to make: close the church or stay open. No one can make that decision for you, it's the work of every individual church to decide when it is time to close. Grace church did a Paul in prison; you looked around at your present circumstances and made the decision to ***dwell in joy***. It was a tough choice because every outside indication was that it was time to close the doors, that Grace's work was done. But faith demanded the doors of the church remain open, missions and ministries be revitalized, and you remain the church here on the corners of Church and Winter Streets. Grace UMC, thank you for deciding that this place is your home and choosing to ***dwell in joy***.

When I arrived there were two children, no babies, no baptisms, and no confirmations. It takes a strong faith to go on when it seems as if there is no reason to have hope, but Grace church, you decided to ***dwell in joy*** believing that God who raised Jesus from the dead could raise you too. No babies became 1 baby, became 2 babies, became a shout of joy when baby number 3 came through the doors this year. No confirmations became 2 confirmations, no baptisms became 6 baptisms, 2 children during the children's message became 4 and some Sundays we have so many that Charissa can't sit on the steps because there is no room. That, family of God, is what happens when we ***dwell in joy***.

There is no magic formula that makes this world a fairy tale and all our problems fade away; Paul would **NEVER** say that. Paul would never tell you that all our problems are going to magically fade away any more than his chains or the door that locked him in his cell would. What Paul says is that we are given a choice on how we to respond, and that our response should always be ***dwell in joy***. In the midst of growth, we experienced physical death, people who disagreed with the new direction of the church left, the ac needed to be replaced, the pipes backed up, the towers were falling, the steps needed to be replaced, and the list goes on and on. In the midst of it all, the work of Grace church continues, we moved forward and decided that no matter the circumstances, we are called to ***dwell in joy***.

And today, well today is a day of celebration. Not because everything was easy, but because our faith has brought us this far. Grace Church has a rich history of raising its members into pastoral ministry. A few years ago, most folks would have said that Grace's history of raising members into pastoral ministry, like baptisms, confirmations, and new memberships, was over. But it wasn't and it isn't. Grace Church's own Brian was sent into pastoral ministry last August and he began his journey of serving and leading a congregation as faithfully as this body has nourished him.

And me...well, I was appointed to Grace church as a licensed local pastor, became a commissioned Provisional Elder the following May, and now I'm an Elder in Full Connection. It was some hard work...which I completed while complaining EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. I have never been one to be quiet and in fact I may have gotten louder as I've served here. But here's my point...it's your faith which has taken both me and Grace church this far. Have no doubt about it, we worked this out together and every step we took was a step of faith in God which is steeped into the very DNA of Grace church. And that our best is yet to come!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, family of God, when some well-meaning person comes to you and quotes Paul saying, *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*, be better than me and don't give them the stink eye because not everyone knows the cost Paul was paying when he wrote his message to the Philippians. But I want **you** to remember that while Paul's dwelling was a physical prison, he chose to **dwell in joy** that can only be found in Christ...that his peace came from God and not his circumstances. And that while that person is transforming scripture to suit their narrative, that **you** are being transformed by that same scripture to teach the world what it really means to live in this world while being transformed by a living God of resurrection who tells us that no matter what the world may throw at us, we are called to live into our faith and to **dwell in joy** as we are being continually refreshed and renewed by a hard fought faith in Christ.

Response to the Word: Lord God, you have brought us this far by faith. As we walk through this week, may we be reminded of Paul's letter to the Philippians, written in a jail cell while chained to the ground. May we be faithful to his call to remember that we dwell in joy.