

“Waiting in Joy”
December 17, 2023

Based on 1 Thessalonians 5:16

Rejoice always.

We can tell a little something about the state of the world, this Third Sunday of Advent, Two Thousand Twenty Three, when the headlines out of Bethlehem proclaim: *Christmas Is Canceled*.

Bethlehem is sad and broken, says the Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac, Pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church. *If Christ were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble.*

Indeed, the exhortation of Paul to the Thessalonians to *rejoice always* rings hollow for so many for whom joy seems so far away. *I don't think I can do this*, we said in our Teach the Preacher gathering earlier this week as we reflected on this Lesson. *I know of no one who is ALWAYS rejoicing.*

Which is, I think, the point.

The Thessalonians, too, are not rejoicing. They are afraid. The more they have embraced The Way of Jesus in Beloved Community, the more the powers that be - who are threatened by that Way - have retaliated in response. The Thessalonians are suffering, Paul assures them earlier in the Letter, the same way Jesus suffered, and the prophets, too. Now they must choose what to do in response to that suffering.

One option is to fight back. Abandon all the principles they have learned from Jesus about compassion and grace and mercy and loving their enemy and praying for those who persecute them.

One option is to hunker down. Build a fortress around themselves that might keep them safer for the moment but will only exacerbate the *us versus them* mentality they have been trying all this time to break down.

One option is to flee. Forget about this Jesus thing, it is just too hard, I want my old life back, I give up on this Beloved Community business.

We, too, here at SPC have been struggling with these options.

How do we keep our community safe, from gun violence in particular, but from all violence in general? For months now, a Safety Team has wrestled with this question, acknowledging the fear many of us have that a congregation with our values and commitments could easily become a target and that even the most up-to-date, technologically advanced security systems might not be able to protect us.

At the same time, it is the welcoming, hospitable atmosphere of our congregation that makes everything we do worthwhile. Giving up our values and commitments for the illusion of safety is no safety at all. As well, we have no wish to align ourselves with an expanding surveillance state that perpetuates even further injustice against people of color.

What then, do we do, when we struggle to feel safe, when joy seems very far away, when the suffering is too much, and we do not know where to turn?

The final option, and the only one Paul is willing to entertain, is to choose *chairete*.

Chairete, in the Greek, the second person plural imperative form of the verb, meaning *all y'all need to choose joy*, but also meaning so much more than that. *Be favorably disposed*, we could also say, meaning something like *do your darnedest to focus on something positive* in the midst of all this suffering or *don't stop trying to understand people or situations until you have found something good in them*.

Chairete can also mean *glad for grace*, which ... yeah! In the midst of all we are suffering, at least there is that. In the broader sense *chairete* can also simply mean, *be well*. *Do what it takes to thrive, not just survive*. This is what I want for you, Paul is saying to the Thessalonians. I just want you to be well. Always.

Which brings us to *eucharist*, which shares the same root of *grace* as the verb *chairete*. Our Great Thanksgiving and the meal we share with the ancient Thessalonians is, on the one hand, a no holds barred confession of crucifixion in all of its ugly forms while at the exact same time proclaiming a bold and prophetic choice to cling to the joy of resurrection.

The *chairete* of Eucharist insists there *is* something for which we can be grateful, even in the midst of so much suffering and fear, and in that gratitude we choose to find a joy beneath the pile of rubble that has no dependence on external circumstances but is simply a gift of grace from a heart of love. It's like the Whos down in Whoville singing with all their might because they know the true meaning of it all, and they refuse to give it up to a mean old Grinch.

At the end of the day, Paul is saying, the only real safety we have is in the strength of our community, encouraging one another and building one another up, doing what we do because it is the right thing to do, giving thanks for the gift of grace that keeps us doing it.

With our Lesson from Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians as our guide, Christmas bids us proclaim, at the end of the day, in spite of every rational reason to the contrary, we choose to live in joy!

This is also the message Lexis Zeidan, a Palestinian American activist in Detroit, wishes to share, not just in spite of, but in light of the suffering of her people. *Christmas is about faith and family*, Zeidan says, *and that's what we should always ground ourselves in. It's about caring for others and doing for others and really trying*

to reignite the spirit of what it means to love your neighbor. Knowing, as Jesus teaches, that our neighbor may even be our hated enemy.

It turns out, choosing joy is a powerful act of resistance in the face of unjust suffering. When we choose to live in joy, we can stare into the barrel of a gun and see a pruning hook and a ceremonial shovel. When we choose to live in joy, we can stare into a shell casing for ammunition that kills and see a ringing bell. When we choose to live in joy, one week before Christmas, we can stare into the heart of a child beneath the rubble and see the promise of the risen Christ.