

**Philippians 4:4-7** “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Fellow Christians Enlightened by the Gospel:

One of the traditions of Advent is the Advent wreath. Some of you may have one in your homes. At the recent “Advent by Candlelight” evening the women had one on each table. The wreath is one of the many customs that came to us from our European ancestors. The candles are symbolic, although the meaning varies depending on one’s source. The four colored candles represent the 4 Sundays in the Advent season:

- 1) The **Prophet Candle** represents the OT prophecies of the advent, or coming, of the Savior.
- 2) The **Redeemer Candle** symbolizes God who came to earth to become one of us to carry out the work of redemption.
- 3) The **Shepherd Candle** (pink) represents Jesus coming into our hearts through his Word, just as that Word was announced to the shepherds.
- 4) The **Angel Candle** symbolizes the announcement of the angels of Jesus 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming on Judgment Day, just as they once announced his first coming to his parents and shepherds.
- 5) The **Christ Candle** is in the middle. We’ll light it at Christmas to remember Christ’s purity given to us, and that he is “*The light of the world*” giving to us the “*light of life.*”

So, besides looking nice, this wreath and these candles have meaning for us to reflect on as we prepare for Christmas.

Today let’s use Paul’s words to the Philippians to connect different meanings with our 4 candles. We’ll call it “**Faith’s Candles on Your Advent Wreath**”. We’ll refer to them today as (1) **Joy** (2) **Gentleness** (3) **Prayer** and (4) **Peace**.

## I

“*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again; Rejoice!*” Do you know where Paul was when he wrote this? We probably wouldn’t guess it -- but he was in prison in Rome. The great missionary Paul was cooped up in jail. And yet some of the most beautiful expressions of patient joy are found in this letter. What a profound effect this must have had on the Philippians as they read it. In the face of adversity, Paul didn’t lose hope. His faith in Christ was strong and real. It was evident by his joy.

***“Rejoice in the Lord always.”*** Always? How can we do that when cut by life’s sharp edges? It doesn’t seem reasonable to have joy in trials like illnesses, financial challenges, emotional upheaval, and grief. But prisoner Paul says it twice: ***“I will say it again, ‘Rejoice!’”***

Like Paul, you and I have a gift from God we might call “Gospel Joy.” It’s different from earthly joy. Gospel Joy is not determined by our *outward circumstances* in life but rather by the *inner condition* of the believing heart. Gospel Joy isn’t giddiness or even a mere happy emotion. We certainly recognize pain, empathize with it, and bear one another’s burdens. But notice what Paul says, ***“Rejoice in the Lord always.”*** Our joy is from and in the Lord Jesus. It is the joy of forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting. We may feel like fainting in fear or burying ourselves in sadness, but Jesus gives us our equilibrium. He reminds us that we have the brightest of futures. Ask a Christian waiting for open heart surgery, going through chemo or radiation therapy, or working his or her way through the deep wound of grief. Even with all the fear and pain, there is still something Jesus plants in us giving us a reason and the strength to go on. It’s his gift of forgiveness and everlasting life. This joy coats with soothing salve every pain of this troublesome, yet temporary, life.

## II

Is the joy candle glowing on your advent wreath? The next candle is connected: **Gentleness.** ***“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”***

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was a member of the U.S. Supreme Court for 30 years. At one point in his life he was asked by a student about his career choice. He said, ***“I actually might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.”*** A point well taken! Why would anyone want to become a pastor or even listen to a pastor or any Christian if we who have the “Good News” act and speak like it’s not good news at all?! The Law might be sharpened steel, but the Gospel is the sweetest, most gentle thing on earth!

The Greek word ***“gentleness”*** is connected with humility and kindness. It has to do with treating others with respect, not as people who are beneath me or who annoy me by asking too much of me. It flows from knowing I am sinful and imperfect. The *People’s Bible* says that ***“gentleness”*** is ***“the very opposite of the self-centered contentiousness of a mean world.”***

“Gentleness” takes an interest in others and therefore it spreads joy. I read about a senior citizen who liked going to the post office in her town because the employees there were friendly. One day the line was long and someone pointed out to her that she could buy stamps more quickly from a machine in the lobby. ***“I know,”*** she said, ***“but the stamp machine won’t ask me about my arthritis.”***

When people come to worship they want to **see** Jesus. I’m not talking about Jesus in the statue or stained glass windows. I’m talking about seeing Jesus in us! Paul reminds us that **now** is the time to project Jesus: ***“Let your gentleness be evi-***

*dent to all. The Lord is near.*” Jesus can return anytime. We want to be Jesus to all so they will want to know more, hear the good news, and be saved! Joy=candle #1. Gentleness=candle #2!

### III

*“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”* The Greek word for *“anxious”* has to do with being distracted, being pulled from all sides at the same time. How well we know that our world offers all kinds of reasons to **fret**, especially during the Christmas season. And there’s all the normal stuff too: work, meetings, family, schedules, doctors, the kids’ games to attend! It’s so much! Sometimes it’s *“Stop the world. I want to get off!”*

We humans work, we plan, we prepare -- but the outcome is in God’s hands. *“Man proposes, but God disposes.”* Paul’s message: If that’s the case, why worry? Then Paul tells us about a cure for the anxious heart: **pray**. Talk to the Lord.

Prayer is an act of faith. It’s taking God at his Word and placing all our issues into the hands of the One who has the power and love to deal with every one of those troubles for our spiritual benefit. Back up the dump truck filled with anxiety and problems and let it all go at Jesus’ feet! If God loves us enough to give us heaven through Jesus, then he also loves us enough to bring us through the worries of this earth. He’s the Master at melting fear and worry like ice in the sunshine!

### IV

Candle #3, *Prayer*, gives way then to Candle #4: *Peace*. *“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* It has been said that *“Peace is the calm after Calvary’s storm.”* Think of the storm Jesus went through on the cross. Think of the peace Jesus won and gives us with God -- perfect oneness and complete fellowship. Our hearts have a beautiful tranquility and serenity that every believer cherishes. It surpasses the understanding, the reasoning powers, of men and angels.

Paul says this peace is *“guarding your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”* Like Roman soldiers protecting the emperor or befeaters at Buckingham Palace, God’s peace stands like a sentinel at the gate guarding us from daily attacks by Satan and the world’s frightening events. It reminds us also that the center candle on the wreath and the center of our lives is Jesus. By God’s grace, the Prince of Peace was born for you, for me, and for all.

Yes, it’s Christmastime. Because of Jesus we can *“Rejoice! I will say it again, Rejoice!”*

Amen.