



As I mentioned last week, Advent is a necessary preparation for the celebration of Christmas. There must be a time of preparation and waiting if we are to celebrate Christmas worthily. With this image in mind, we can say that our whole earthly life is an Advent. Our earthly life is a time of waiting and hoping and choosing. It is necessary that we go through our earthly life because God has given us this time of preparation for eternal life. Our choices to follow Christ now have consequences for all eternity.

But it's a difficult time, this Advent of our lives, full of sorrow and worries and fears, illness, constant laboring, difficulties of every kind. St. Paul helps us today to live this time. First, he says to us "Rejoice in the Lord always." Notice he doesn't say, "Rejoice in the Lord when you are happy," or "Rejoice in the Lord when you feel like it," but "Rejoice in the Lord **always**."

How can we do this when things are so rotten in life sometimes?

I want to make an important human distinction for you. There is a difference between our feelings – that is, our emotions – and our wills. Feelings, emotions, are a good thing, created by God. Feelings, emotions, are put into us by God, but they are unruly and fickle because of original sin.

On the other hand, our will is the power within us to choose. Our will too has been affected by original sin. Because of original sin it is weak, and like exercising a muscle we strengthen our will by choosing good. This is what virtue is, the habit of choosing good. Our wills become more and more free as we choose the good, especially by the power of the grace of our baptism.

What's my point with all this?

There are times when we don't **feel** like rejoicing. We feel sadness, anger, despair, frustration. But remember, our feelings are unruly and fickle. I'm not saying we should ignore or oppress our feelings. That would be unhealthy. They are a part of us. They communicate to us what our situation is in life. Rather, what I am saying is, we should not be **ruled** by our feelings. This is what St. Paul is saying. "Rejoice in the Lord always." Choose with the strength of your will to rejoice in God no matter what your life situation. You see, when we choose to rejoice to God, implicit in that choice is trust, thankfulness, hoping in God that the present difficulties will not last forever.

I've told you the story before of St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest who volunteered to go to his death in a Nazi concentration camp in the place of another condemned man. While he and nine others were being starved to death, St. Maximilian continually sang to the others to keep up their spirits. He chose to rejoice in the Lord always.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Choose to rejoice.

The same can be said with what follows in St. Paul's letter that we heard today. "Have no anxiety at all but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." Now again, we cannot always control the feelings of anxiety that we have – because remember, feelings are many times unruly and fickle – but we can choose to trust God.

If we are anxious about something, St. Paul says, tell the Lord what you need then choose to stop worrying about it and let God handle it.

What will happen if we do this? We will have peace, St Paul says. If we choose to rejoice in the Lord always, if we choose to stop worrying about things and give to God our needs, then the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds.

The difficulties of life may not go away immediately. They may not go away at all. But by choosing to rejoice in the Lord always and by choosing not to be ruled by anxiety we are choosing to trust God and to be filled with thankfulness. We are choosing not to be ruled by often very self-pitying emotions. This brings us peace.

On this Third Sunday of Advent we rejoice that the celebration of our Lord's birth is so near. In the Advent of our lives, let us rejoice in the Lord **always**.

**Fr. Mark Gurtner at St. Anthony de Padua Church, South Bend**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent 2009**