

Today is “*Rejoice Sunday*”, according to old traditions of the Church going way back. That’s why the candle for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent is pink/rose colored—so as to call special attention to *rejoicing*. And we can definitely say that *Christmas* is a special day of rejoicing, yes? Also, practically speaking, *every Sunday* is a Rejoice Sunday.

But the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonian church, takes it even further: “Rejoice *always*...pray *without ceasing*...give thanks in *all* circumstances...” That kind of sounds like a lot! Can we even do that?! Or is Paul just giving in to some preacherly excess and exaggeration? Or, a skeptic could say that he isn’t even speaking truthfully—nobody can rejoice always. Or someone who is hurting from life could say that it actually hurts even more to be told that they need to do what feels impossible. These are all understandable responses.

So I have been thinking this week about what I now think Paul is doing here. And so...what I think is that Paul is not trying to add insult to injury for those who are feeling wounded from life. And I don’t think he is lying. Looking back now, I have perhaps tended to assume that Paul was engaging in some well-intended preacherly exaggeration—in order to motivate people.

But this year, I believe that what may actually be happening is that Paul is talking more about *God* than about *us*.

**“Rejoice always” actually makes no sense if *God* is not *infinitely joyful*.**

**“Pray without ceasing” makes no sense if *God* is not *infinitely responsive*.**

**“Give thanks in all circumstances” would in fact be cruel if *God* is not *infinitely loving*.**

But of course there is a pervasive theology out there *of a God that is scrutinizing our every thought and action to see where we fail, who has to be begged for attention, and who only loves us if we get everything just right and manage to say just the right words to appease God*. I do not think it is an exaggeration at all to say that, some how, the *good news* of God in Christ, has more often than not, become the *bad news* of a God who is actually unlovable but who can only be feared.

So, I am imagining that Paul is talking more about *God* than about *us* when he speaks so exuberantly of rejoicing, praying, and thankfulness. And he goes onto say that we must not “quench the Spirit”—because indeed the Spirit is full of joy, responsiveness, and love. And that we should “test everything” because there is in fact “good” worth holding onto...and there is “evil” which must be recognized for what it is.

*We do not hear often enough just how joyful God is, who is joyful to create us, who is joyful to receive again all who have died, and who sees the final restoration of all people and things unto himself. We do not hear enough just how close God is to our prayers—as near to us as our very breath. We do not hear enough how loving God is, having compassion upon our own betrayals and betraying, sufferings, and deaths, such as Christ himself knows so well, calling us to compassion like unto his own. And we do not hear how much peace resides in God and is offered to all-- which calls us to “Pass the Peace” in worship--such peace of God that is just right underneath the still and quiet moments of our lives.*

But something can happen at this time of the year. And the true God breaks through our illusions and delusions. And rejoicing...prayer...and gratitude...can be our glad response.