

“Knitting Before God”

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Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Paul wrote to his friends, the Christians at Philippi:
“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

It’s a beautiful word, isn’t it?
Rejoice!
Jubilation and elation,
Joy and good cheer,
Celebration and family and friends and food and fun.
All the things that Christmas should be.

What Christmas should be.
What should Christmas be?
Many of us come into Christmas with Expectations with a capital “E.”

Christmas is freighted with Expectations
From a time before we can remember
 from a toddling-in-pajamas-with-feet time;
 from a long-gazing-at-tree-lights-time;
 from an early-waking-whispering-thundering-downstairs time.

The children still have it--
 the excitement, the expectations, the electric energy.
At my house, the countdown has been going on for months;
it moved into its daily update phase the day after Thanksgiving.
Now, we’re at T-minus 46 hours and counting.
Make that 45 hours, 59 minutes, 55 seconds.

Adults I know—most of us—approach Christmas with somewhat less ebullient enthusiasm. We enjoy Christmas—fine, lovely—and, over time, we have learned that, while the gifts and celebrations may be wonderful, they generally don’t raise the “set point” of our overall happiness.

Do you know about the research on the happiness set point? It suggests that, once our basic needs are met, money, age, gender, income, race, education, and social status don’t really hold much sway on our levels of happiness; nor, ultimately, do major life events such as marriage or childbirth or Christmas. Once the initial excitement wanes, it’s January, and it’s pretty much back to your happiness set point.

So, we may not get quite so “beside ourselves” about Christmas as we did when we were six. Over time, instead, we tend to arrive at the Christmas station with increasingly heavy baggage—

emotional baggage,
Expectations of ourselves and others,
imperfect and strained and broken relationships.
Memories.

Christmas marks time and change.
We remember earlier Christmases.
We miss and mourn those who were once around the tree with us, and who will not be
this year.

There may be years, let's admit it, when the losses seem too great to bear, or the situation
seems so grim, that the best we can hope for, let's be honest, is to get through the
holidays.

And even in happier years, the frantic nature of what has become of our lives in the
month of December—the length of our to-do lists, what we believe we have to do to meet
our own Expectations about what Christmas should be—may mean that we basically fall,
exhausted, over the finish line on Christmas Day. It's the same feeling you get when
you've spent the entire day preparing a meal that's devoured in 45 minutes: “Wow. That
was quick. Did I enjoy it?”

And yet, Paul reminds us to rejoice. “I'll put that on the list, Paul,” I want to say to him,
“right after I turn in my final paper, buy and wrap the presents, donate the donations,
write this sermon, cook the roast beef,”—you get the picture. Maybe Paul had time to
rejoice because he was in prison and had nothing else to do!

But listen again to Paul's exhortation: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” This
may be a different kind of rejoicing. A gentle and generous rejoicing: “let your
gentleness be known to everyone.” Personally, I will say that I can be quite gentle, but
almost never when I am crossing items off my to-do list.

Listen again to what Paul tells us: “The Lord is near.” Here is the true cause of our
rejoicing.

We hear a lot of talk about the “true meaning of Christmas.” As Christians, we teach our
children that Christmas is about Jesus, not just Santa. Christmas is about giving, not
receiving. Christmas is about others, not about ourselves. But even in these extremely
worthwhile lessons, are we in danger of missing the main point?

The Lord is near. Christmas is the celebration of God with us. Emmanuel. God with us.

We come to Christmas with the hope that this year, we will somehow—we know not
how—feel God with us more strongly and surely. We come with the hope that somehow
God will break into the world and into our own lives in a way that strengthens our belief.
That this is the year when the set-point of our faith will be recalibrated, and we will be
changed.

And yet, when these hopes become “shoulds,” it’s easy to let our expectations of what we would like to happen drown out what actually does happen to us spiritually. “I should feel joy; I should rejoice; I should feel the presence of God.” When this happens, we can douse that quiet, perhaps small, flame of real joy that is still there in each of us, even in those years when it seems to burn so dimly that we think it just might have gone out.

Paul advises, “Let your requests be known to God.” Notice that Paul does not say that all requests will be granted. As we know, God is not a genie granting us any three wishes of our choosing; God is not Santa with a list of the naughty and nice. Sometimes, as we know, bad things happen to very human people; some years, Christmas comes with more sorrow than joy; sometimes we hurt and God does not seem so near. And at Christmas, we remember that God is, indeed, with us. And, if we can’t remember on our own this year, we will help one another; that’s why we’re here together.

So, if the reason for Christmas is remembering and celebrating and experiencing and sharing “God with us,” where is the time in our December lives for listening to God, for prayer? On Sunday, together, we hope; tomorrow, on Christmas Eve, together, we hope. And if that is the only space in our lives for prayer, might we perhaps be missing out on an important path to the faith and peace that we are longing for?

In my experience, most people don’t talk much about prayer, even in church. We don’t talk easily about when we pray, why we pray, how we do it, or what it does for us. In coffee hour, I just don’t hear anyone asking, “So, how’s prayer going for you this week?”

Maybe our reticence is because prayer is such a private act of faith; maybe it’s because we don’t have the vocabulary to describe it; maybe it’s because we don’t pray, or don’t do so as often as we think we should. I admit that I too often think of prayer sort of like I think of exercise. I know I should do it. I actually do want to do it. I will do it. Just not right now.

Part of the problem may be that we’re not always sure what we’re doing when we pray—is this an appropriate thing to pray about? What’s the point? How will I know what the answer is? What if God doesn’t answer my prayer? What if God does?

What if it’s really so much simpler than that?

Anthony Bloom, an Eastern Orthodox archbishop, told a story about prayer in a lovely little book called *Beginning to Pray*.¹ As a young priest, he was sent to minister to people in a nursing home, and one of the women who lived there came to him and said, “Father, I would like to have advice about prayer...All these years, I have been asking people who are reputed to know about prayer, and they have never given me a sensible reply, so I thought that as you probably know nothing, you may by chance blunder out the right thing.”

¹ Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1970).

A bit taken aback, Bloom asked her what the problem was. She said, “These fourteen years, I have been praying the Jesus Prayer almost continually, and never have I perceived God’s presence at all.” So he blurted out what he thought and said, “If you speak all of the time, you don’t give God a chance to get a word in.”

He told her to go to her room after breakfast, light her lamp, and take stock of her room. “Just sit, look around, and try to see where you live,” he said. “And then take your knitting and for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God, but I forbid you to say one word of prayer. You just knit and try to enjoy the peace of your room.”

She didn’t think this was very pious advice, but she tried it anyway. After a while, she came back to the young priest and she told him, “You know, it works. I did just what you told me to do...I settled into my armchair, and I thought, ‘Oh, how nice, I have fifteen minutes during which I can do nothing without feeling guilty!’”

And she looked around, and for the first time in years, she thought, “What a nice room I live in—a window opening into the garden, enough space for me, for the things I have collected.” She felt peaceful and quiet there.

“After a while,” she said, “I remembered that I must knit before the face of God, so I began to knit. And I became more and more aware of the silence. The needles hit the armrest of my chair, the clock was ticking peacefully, there was nothing to bother about...and then, I perceived that this silence had substance. It was not absence of noise, but the presence of something. The silence around me began to come and meet the silence in me. At the heart of the silence, there was the One who is all stillness, all peace.”

It’s not too early for us this December to find the One who is all stillness, all peace. We need not wait until we retire or take vacation or get a different job or even do the dishes after Christmas dinner on Tuesday. It’s not too early for us to listen for God. And it’s not too late, either. Even if our December has been a blur of rushing, and shopping, and planning, and wrapping, and eating, and driving, and searching for parking, and not knowing what to get so-and-so-ing, it’s not too late to make this Christmas what we want it to be...an acknowledgment—no, more than that—an experience of God with us. Emmanuel.

Today, it’s not too early and it’s not too late. Take fifteen minutes. Just sit, look around, and see where you live.

May each of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the most skeptical to the truest believer, may each of us, this Christmas, find a flame of true, God-given joy. May we experience the nearness and the presence of God and may we rejoice. May God be with you. May God be with you. May God be with you. Amen.