



From the Pulpit: September 3, 2023

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time—Labor Day Weekend

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Philippians 4:10–13

Joy Anyway, VI: Rejoice in the Lord

Today we are wrapping up our six-week sermon series about Paul’s letter to the Philippians titled Joy Anyway. What Katie and I have discovered is that joy does not stand alone; it coexists with a multitude of emotions and experiences. This morning we will explore joy’s relationship to hope; especially the hope that comes from witnessing God’s redemptive work in the world. Our passage is from Philippians 4:10–13.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

“Paul promises that joy will come from living a Christ shaped life even when it doesn’t bring popularity or prosperity.”

of the values and customs of the Roman Empire.¹ Paul promises that joy will come from living a Christ shaped life even when it doesn’t bring popularity or prosperity. Even when it lands you in prison.

Paul once had a steady income as a tent-maker. Yet in prison he claims to have found the secret to contentment with what little he has. Anyone who has ever taken a child shopping in Target knows how difficult this is. Every aisle is filled with temptation. “I want those cookies. Look at this cute T- shirt! Will you buy me that toy? How about a pack of gum? Please?” Adults are tempted too, especially in the Magnolia aisle where Chip and Joanna Gaines convince us that fall will be much more cozy with a Harvest Plaid Woven throw.

At last in the final portion of this letter, Paul gets around to thanking the good people of Philippi for their financial support of his ministry. “Thanks for sending it when you could,” he says, “but I didn’t really need it. I know how to live with what I’ve got.” Don’t use this part of Paul’s letter as a model for the thank you note you write to your grandmother after she sends you extra cash when you’re down to \$18 in your college account. She’s not going to react well to “It finally got here, I could have gotten by without it, but thanks anyway!”

As a parent I tried to model contentment rooted in gratitude for God’s gifts. I learned to say on repeat, “We have all the things we need. We have enough money to have some of the things we want. And we have the ability to help others who don’t have enough.” Brian and I intentionally used spending money as a learning opportunity. Every year the amount we gave our girls increased, along with their responsibility for purchasing necessities and wants. Starting with a couple dollars they could use for treats at Target, by the end of high school they were managing the entirety of their clothing and entertainment budget. That practice absolutely reduced the number of requests for “just this one thing,” while increasing their independence. I hope it helped instill contentment.

Before we throw Emily Post’s etiquette book at Paul, let’s remember that his primary purpose in penning this note is to encourage the Philippians who have internal disagreements and who find it hard to follow Jesus instead

¹ Daniel L. Migliore, *Philippians and Philemon: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014, 4–6, 170–172.

This Labor Day weekend we are reminded that providing for the necessities requires living wages and safe working conditions that often arise out of organized effort. Monday, August 28 was the anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Bayard Rustin was deputy director of the march. His Quaker faith inspired a lifelong pursuit of civil rights. As a college student he protested the low-quality cafeteria food at Wilberforce University. It cost him his scholarship.² In recognition of his tireless activism, Rustin was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom Award and inducted into the US Department of Labor's Hall of Honor, which says "Rustin remains unequalled in his effectiveness as a labor, civil, and human rights leader. An openly gay man in a cruel era, Rustin's determination to achieve social justice and equal opportunity was matched only by his personal courage.... The lives of countless workers are better today because of Rustin's activism..."³

Rustin's organizing skills brought 250,000 people to DC to hear Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream." Dr. King's words, rooted in scripture, still ring with hope for us today.⁴

The leaders of last week's anniversary event called it "a continuation, not a commemoration,"⁵ stressing that the American dream of equality and God's dream of justice for all are still works in progress.

One of you said to me recently, "TV news makes me sad." I agree. The endless list of intractable problems foments despair. But there are research backed practices for nurturing the hope necessary for living faithfully in a troubled world.

"According to the 'Science of Happiness Podcast' commemoration is key to the continuation of positive action."

According to the *Science of Happiness Podcast*, **commemoration** is key to the **continuation of positive** action. It's a two-step process. First write about something important that you hope for. The poet on the podcast wrote about climate change. He hopes that the ice can return and for the native flora and fauna to thrive again. He hopes for protected places and for nations and people to make needed change."

The second step to nurturing hope is to remember something that you weren't sure would happen but did. The poet wrote about the fear he felt learning about the ozone hole as a child and then the surprise of learning that human action has been shrinking the hole since the year 2000. He reflected on the environmentally aware actions he took that contributed positively to the solution.

This practice was developed by a psychologist, Dr. Charlotte Van Oyen Witvliet. For her hope is the place

between "helpless despair and naive optimism" that leads to passivity and inaction.⁶ Continuing to work for change requires remembering positive outcomes in the past. Hope requires prior evidence that the story can turn out ok.⁷

Paul's evidence that things can be ok comes from his encounter with the Risen Christ in a blinding light on the road to Damascus. He transforms from a fierce opponent on the hunt for Christians to jail into someone who many consider to be the second most important person in the history of Christianity, after Jesus of course. He goes on to found at least 14 churches and write letters that make up 25% of the entire New Testament.

²<https://www.thecollector.com/bayard-rustin-civil-rights-movement-leader/>

³https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/hallofhonor/2013_rustin

⁴<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>

⁵<https://www.npr.org/2023/08/26/1196190910/march-on-washington-mlk-dream-speech-anniversary>

⁶https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/how_to_feel_more_hopeful_tomas_morin

⁷https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/podcasts/item/how_to_feel_more_hopeful_tomas_morin

Paul has contentment and hope because his life is evidence that in the face of the impossible, God is “possibility itself,” to use one of [Katie’s favorite names for God](#). Paul wants to share his hope with the church at Philippi: The life, death, and resurrection of Christ shows that God never gives up on humanity. “Rejoice in the Lord” Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Friends this 2,000-year-old story is the ground of our faith, the evidence that strengthens us, and the source of our hope. It is God’s word for us today.

But maybe, just maybe, a few more recent examples that good things that happen out of uncertainty would be helpful?

Author Katherine May is on a search for “hierophanies,” or everyday manifestations of the Divine, in an anxious age where many of us feel “discombobulated, confused, disoriented, and out of sorts.”⁸ She finds depth of meaning as she forest bathes, makes her own connection with a new Stonehenge—like art installation found in a meadow, and experiences transcendence even when a super moon thwarts her trip to view meteor showers in a dark sky. She writes about enchantment and the need to remake our stories until we find the “one that fits.” God, she says has always been a name whispered between us.⁹

Hope is whispered in the 22 years since the tragedy of 9/11. I will never forget holding my 3-month-old baby while watching the towers fall live on TV, being immediately consumed with despair, fearing “what my life and my children’s life might be.”¹⁰ Slowly, gradually, good things came. First words, countless family dinners. New friends. Overnight trips and concerts. Church community. Graduations.

⁸Katherine May, *Enchantment: Awakening Wonder in an Anxious Age*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2023, 15.

⁹Katherine May, *Enchantment*, 196.

¹⁰From Wendell Berry’s poem, “The Peace of Wild Things.”

And now this September, the last first day of college. Every night my photo app reminds me of joyful memories from 3, 12, and 20 years ago. I cannot help but be grateful for each of these impossible possibilities.

Young adults from Generation Z, born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, face unprecedented challenges that have fueled a mental health crisis. One Forbes columnist writes, “This is a generation who is coming of age in an era of mass shootings [in schools], a global pandemic, and turbocharged political turmoil. These things will invariably take their toll on young people, and all people.”¹¹ But she argues, Gen Z is not hopeless. She lists half a dozen young people who are having an impact, like Indonesian sisters Melati and Isabel Wijsen who at 10 and 12 founded a nonprofit that keeps mountains of single use plastic bags and other items off the beaches and out of the rivers of Bali.

Where does Gen Z find their hope? One young adult shared with me her evidence that good things can

happen in uncertainty. Remembering the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic she talked about the fear that it might not end. But now three years later Covid isn’t gone, but there are tests and treatments. There is immunity. Our lives are returning to normal because everyday people came together to meet the challenge.

Or what about the miracle of monarchs? The Western population which winters in California’s Central Coast has rebounded from just a few thousand after the 2020 wildfires to more than 200,000 at the last New Year’s Count¹² The Eastern monarchs which migrate to Illinois from Mexico are also still threatened by pesticides and deforestation in their overwintering sites. But more and more people are incorporating the Monarch’s only host plant, milkweed into their gardens.

¹¹<https://www.forbes.com/sites/vickiphilips/2023/01/24/gen-z-hopeless-or-hopeful/?sh=680778be10f9>

¹²<https://www.westernmonarchcount.org/new-years-count-of-western-monarchs-reveals-high-seasonal-decrease-following-severe-winter-storms/>

“Our lives are returning to normal because everyday people came together to meet the challenge.”

—The Great Prayer—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

My hope for the monarchs comes from learning that the farmer who rents my father's estate continues to follow my dad's instruction to raise the mower blades when he comes across a stand of roadside milkweed.

Faith is living in the kind of hope that holds the potential to change the world. As Dr. King put it 60 years ago:

*With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together...*¹³

Hope is joy, anyway. Hope is foregoing the plastic bag, lifting the mower blade, planting the acorn knowing you won't see the oak's shade. Hope is caring for this church building with confidence that 2 and 3 and 5 and 10 years from now we will baptize babies who aren't yet a dream in this beloved font. Hope is made of millions of impossible possibilities, and countless small but courageous acts. Hope is a dream we continue to dream. Hope is the whispered tale of God making a way out of none. Hope is this table Christ prepares for us. For Paul, and for us, may "Rejoice in the Lord" be our eternal refrain.

God, you are source and sustenance, you restore and advance our flourishing, you draw us together, friend to friend, loved one to loved one, side by side, where we can know a different kind of joy, even amid the many goodbyes, sorrows, and heartaches that trace the contours of our lives.

We ask your presence among us.

At this table before us, we remember that ours is a thick, embodied spirituality. When our bellies are hungry, the most ordinary daily matter, we know you are there. When we gather to feast, we know you are there. As we bake bread, yeast and flour become an alchemy of love, a reminder that we taste and see your presence in this life. All eating is an act of memory, and our gratitude here, a spoken memory of thanks, reminding us that all is gift and gift and ever-gift.

Place us side by side with kind traveling partners for this part of life's journey. Let us see the abundance of your good creation together, and even in the midst of suffering, let us experience an echo of joy at the core.

Shape us.

Open us to a deeper awareness of our mutual reliance. Call us into a cycle of flourishing, even when our bodies are hope-weary, and we are barely hanging on. Let us laugh together around the dinner table, and on hard days, cry on the kitchen floor, still connected to your promises of presence, comfort, strength, and tender care every step of the way.

For those who are in the hospital today, mark the way with hope. For those who are in hospice, mark the way with a gentle spirit and a holy goodbye. For those who do not know how to say goodbye, give words, gestures, deep breath, a presence beyond what we might otherwise notice. For those recovering, give renewed strength. For those who have had a hard path, give relief.

For the global community, the interconnected web of family and friends around the world, we pray: especially for those who can't catch a break, whose lives have been turned upside down, who have found the world strained by powers beyond their control.

Make a way O God. Make a way even when no way seems to be found. And guide us always toward your table, remembering again the storied flourishing that can be made possible in your presence. And hear us as we pray: Our Father.... Amen.

¹³<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>

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