

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our kids are learning the facts of life much earlier in life than we ever did. Even as they write their letters to Santa Claus, they are becoming more and more precocious. Last year one of our 8 year olds decided he didn't want to write a big, long list. So, he wrote this to Santa: "Dear Santa Claus, I don't want you to have to carry a big, heavy bag of gifts to our house since you are getting old. So, would you please just give me \$100.00 so I can buy my gifts myself. Love, Timmy"

The local postmaster saw the letter addressed to Santa Claus, U.S.A. and decided to have some fun so he sent it to the I.R.S. The I.R.S. agent who opened the letter was touched by what he considered was the thoughtfulness of the boy. He picked up an envelope off his desk and mailed Timmy a \$5.00 bill, thinking this would appear to be a lot of money to a little boy.

Delighted when he received the \$5.00, Timmy sat down and wrote a thank you note to Santa. It said, "Dear Santa Claus, thank you very much for sending me the money. But, I noticed that for some reason you had to send it through the IRS and as usual, those jerks deducted \$95.00."

You really have to be something of a Scrooge if you're not finding all this Christmas hoopla joyful. Recently I had occasion to talk with a Jewish man. I noted that it was the first of eight days of Hanukah. He said, "That's right. These days of Hanukah are joyful days of celebration and feasting and gift giving for us, but Christmas is like the Super Bowl for you, isn't it? All wrapped up in the one day! I laughed and agreed. Then he said, "It's kind of like a baby shower that's run amuck!" It is indeed!

But that's as it should be. The prophet, Zepaniah, 600 years before the coming of Christ calls on God's people, to shout for joy; sing joyfully; and to be glad and exalt with all your heart, because the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. He then tells us to fear not; no further misfortune will befall us; no need to be discouraged, because the Lord, your God is in your midst.

If we hear this prophecy spoken to us as the Word of God that it is then no Christian worthy of the name need give in to fear, depression, or discouragement.

Some might say, "Come on, Father, be real, my job is a drag or my child is addicted or our marriage is on the rocks or my bills are overwhelming me. Others may say, "Are you kidding? Terrorists are running lose all over the world. It won't be long before they get to us. How can you tell us not to be afraid or depressed or discouraged because some prophet from 2,600 years ago said some high sounding words?"

Well, those high sounding words come straight from the Bible which we claim to believe are God's Word spoken directly to us. And God's Word is as true today as they were 2,600 years ago when Zephaniah spoke them to God's people who had turned away from the worship of God and had gotten caught up in the worship of false idols, much as our generation has gotten caught up in the idols of materialism, secular humanism, and self-absorption.

Still, Zephaniah insists that though we are making a mess of our world and a mess of our lives, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty Savior; he rejoices over you with gladness, and renews you in his love, he sings joyfully because of you."

Please! Think about that for a moment! As God looks at us, just the way we are, the good, the bad, and the ugly of us, He, the Lord, our God, rejoices over each of us with gladness; He, the Lord, our God renews us in His Love; He, the Lord, our God, sings joyfully because of us. God, even now, looks at each of us, whom he made in His image and likeness, and rejoices over us as a Father rejoices over his newborn child. He is the Father who is rejected by his children who have left His home, who wants only to renew us in His love. God even sings joyfully because we are the children whom he loves so dearly.

St. Paul is telling us the same thing today. He says it this way, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again. Rejoice!" What is there to rejoice in. Paul says, because "The Lord is near!" The Lord is here. That's what we are preparing to celebrate at Christmas. The fact, the truth, that God has come as one of us, born, an infant child, in a stable in Bethlehem. And he's come for one reason only: He has come to save us. So, St. Paul tells us, "Have no anxiety AT ALL. It's the same thing that Zephaniah tells us, "Fear not, be not discouraged; you have no further misfortune to fear. The Lord, your God, is in your midst! He is a mighty savior!"

It's important for us to remember that Paul wasn't writing this letter sitting on a sunny beach in Jericho or a fancy Mediterranean resort. He was in chains, in a Roman prison, on what was essentially death row, waiting to be sentenced to death. He had been beaten, stoned (as in rocks thrown at him, not the Colorado kind of stoned), and suffered ship wrecks three times. Paul knew all about suffering and discouragement and had all the reason in the world to be depressed and anxious. Still, he writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again, Rejoice!"

How, then, are we to deal with the real fears and discouragement and depressions that wear us down? St. Paul tells us, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

In other words, he's saying stop worrying about what is or what might be. Rather, be thankful for the blessings of the day. Ask God's help and blessed assurance that everything will be okay. Then, allow his peace, which seems impossible to even understand, guard your hearts and minds in the person of Jesus who has taken all our pain and suffering and heartache upon himself to set us free.

John the Baptist offers us other solutions to our anxieties, fears, discouragements and depressions. He tells us to forget about ourselves by sharing what we have with others in need; be people of trust and integrity regardless of how others are; and be grateful for our blessings.

We are those of whom he spoke who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and the fire of God's Love within us. We are the people who have been empowered by God to overcome every obstacle; the people in whom God rejoices, renews in His love, and of whom He sings. We are the people whom God covers with His peace, guarding our hearts and minds. We are the people to whom God has come as a little infant, born in a stable in Bethlehem, and among whom he dwells as a Risen Savior who has already conquered all evil, even death, on the Cross of Calvary.

So, with St. Paul, I say to you, Church, "Rejoice in the Lord always! I'll say it again, Rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near! The Lord is here! Have no anxiety at all! Be thankful! The Lord's peace covers you and guards and protects you always. I say it again, Rejoice!"