

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Do I have some good news for you? No! I have great news for you! It is phenomenal news any time of the year. But it is absolutely fantastic news to hear at Christmas time.

Here it is! The good news! The great news! Absolutely, phenomenal news! You were made for joy! You weren't made to fret and worry and think about bad or troublesome things. You were made for peace and love and hope and light and joy. Could there be any better news than that?

Unfortunately too many of us are like the woman who dreamed of going back to her ancestral home in Ireland. She flew from Philadelphia to Shannon Airport in County Clare, the whole time complaining about how crowded the plane was. She thought that the cab that took her to her hotel was too small. And she found her hotel room was too cramped and the bed was uncomfortable. For two weeks she traveled through the lush Irish countryside finding fault with the terrible roads, the noisy pubs, and the bland food. She thought that the people were too boisterous and considered them nosy because they always asked her how she was. She was surprised that the two weeks of her holiday ended so quickly and said to the person meeting her back in Philadelphia, "If I'd known it was going to end so soon, I wouldn't have wasted my time complaining so much."

Too many of us do that. As we enter into the autumn of our lives, we realize that we spent way too much time, fretting over so many things, complaining about most inconsequential things, as our lives pass by so quickly.

So, let me remind you once again of today's good, great, absolutely phenomenal news: You were made for joy! You were made for peace and love and hope and light and joy!

As children, we understand that instinctively. The great American poet, Carl Sandburg, reflects that in this poem:

You were made for joy, child. The feet of you were carved for that.

The ankles of you run for that. The rise of rain, the shift of wind, the drop of a red star on a far water rim...

An endless catalogue of shouts and laughter, Silent contemplations They made you from day to day for joy, child, for joy.

It is that same good news that St. Paul gives us today: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again, Rejoice!"

What's important to realize is that St. Paul wrote these words to the people of Philippi while in prison on death row. He penned them while literally chained to a Roman soldier and guarded day and night. Yet, he goes on to say, "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests know to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

It takes great faith to proclaim joy in such dire circumstances. It takes the kind of faith that centers one's life on God's will, trusting in His immutable, unchanging, never diminished love, that has been revealed to us in Christ Jesus.

Yet, the child-like joy that we once had seems to have passed too quickly from too many of our lives. What is it that has robbed you of your joy?

Most people's lives are filled with anxiety. We are afraid of losing our health; we are afraid of losing our wealth. We are afraid for our children and grandchildren; we are afraid for our elderly parents; too many of us are afraid of life itself.

It's like the man who was lying in bed one night. He found himself worrying. Then the thought came to him, "I really don't have a worry in the world." The next thought came, "That worries me." Could there be anyone here like that?

Let's be honest. It's the little things that tie us up in knots, usually little things that are easily fixable with time. Is it your anxiety about your future that is robbing you of your joy?

A wise man once said, "God made the world round so that we would never be able to see too far down the road." It's true. We can't see -down that road. That, in-and-of-itself, causes anxiety for far too many of us. Sadly, there is something within us that causes us to look down that road with fear rather than with faith.

It's interesting that a movie is now more popular than it was when it first came out more than 70 years ago. *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*, seems to resonate with so many who feel, like George Bailey, that life didn't turn out the way they planned. They fear their lives have been disappointing; they fear their lives have lost meaning. Unlike George Bailey, they have yet to realize the very valuable impact their lives have had on others.

Could that be the source of your anxiety? Are you focusing on your disappointments, your shortcomings, rather than counting your blessings and the blessing you are and have been to others? I suspect it is this very source of anxiety that has led to the great increase in the suicide rate in our country, especially among the young.

Do you remember the first thing that the angel said to the shepherds watching over their flock that first Christmas night? It was, “Fear not!” These are, perhaps, the most important words of the whole good news of Christmas. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid of the future with its many uncertainties. God holds the future in His almighty hands. God will not let us down. Don’t be afraid that somehow your life doesn’t measure up. God made you who you are, in this time, in this place, to accomplish His will. God loves you just as you are.

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we can easily let go of the anxieties that are dragging us down and be restored to the joy of our youth by following the simple instructions offered to us today by both St. Paul and St. John the Baptist in today’s Gospel. St. Paul tells us, “Your kindness should be known to all...in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving make your requests known to God.” St. John the Baptist instructs us, “Share what you have with those who have less; feed the hungry; be fair and just in your dealings with others; don’t lie, cheat, or steal, or talk badly of others; and be thankful for what you have and don’t be envious of what others have.”

St. Paul tells us if we do these things, “Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,” because YOU WERE MADE FOR JOY! YOU WERE MADE FOR PEACE AND LOVE AND HOPE AND LIGHT AND JOY!

That’s the good news! That’s the great news! That’s the absolutely phenomenal news!

REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS! I SHALL SAY IT AGAIN, REJOICE! THE LORD IS NEAR! That is the news of ADVENT!