

“I Am the Drowning Man to Whom God Said ‘Breathe’ ”

Philippians 4:4-13

As we conclude our four week journey reading through Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we see that Paul very much wants his readers to be filled with encouragement and true joy and peace and contentment. These are not natural parts of life in this sinful world.

Joy, peace, contentment don’t just happen on their own. They are gifts of God and come from participating in the gifts of God. In the face of the trials of life, I cannot command you to “be joyful”; “be content.” We try that with our children and it doesn’t work. “Be happy or I’ll give you something to cry about.” Why do we think it will work for us?

It would be like telling someone struggling with depression to “snap out of it” and be at peace. Paul says, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always.’” And you struggle; and you don’t feel joy or peace or contentment. And now, what Paul wrote as Gospel, has become a Law to you. These sweet words have been piled on top of the burden of guilt that you already had no strength to lift.

And when you see God as the One who demands from you what you cannot fulfill, you end up being angry at that God. However, when you see God as the One who gives unexpected relief, then you know He is the Prince of Peace.

We live in the “now, but not yet” of our eternal life. Our Old Adam drowned and died in Baptism. We have been raised to a new life in Christ. Jesus says, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who lives and believes in Me will never die.” And the peace and joy and contentment we will know in the life to come is unimaginable. St. Paul says that there simply aren’t words to describe the glory of heaven.

In heaven, telling you to “be at peace” will be like telling a healthy person here on earth to breathe. It will be natural – involuntary. You can’t stop yourself from breathing. Even if you try, you will start breathing again.

Being at peace, having true joy and contentment here on earth is not natural. Our sinful life is like being in the depths of the sea. Separated from God we enter this world in the crushing blackness of the deep. And God says to you, “Breathe.” That is the unexpected gift. That is the grace of Baptism. Having drowned in the water, God gives you the breath of life.

You will not know the fullness of the indescribable glory of God until you depart this life. But my message to you today is that you do not need to wait around for God to call you out of this life for you to find peace and joy. It is unexpected, but it is here in this life.

I cannot decide to have joy and peace. In the same way, I am not sorry for my sins because I have decided to be sorry for my sins. The Holy Spirit has called me to repent and confess “by

my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault I am a poor, miserable sinner.”

The past few weeks, we have heard Paul writing about “koinonia” – fellowship, participation in the things of God. I am called to participate in the confession of my sin, so that I may also participate in the joy of the absolution – so that I may also participate in the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

I have not decided to have faith. The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel and enlightened me with His gifts. I am the drowning man to whom God said, “Breathe.” It is the unexpected relief of a problem I could not fix, of a burden I could not carry.

What Paul is saying is that this makes us capable of enduring any situation – no matter what may come. And this is written by a man sitting in prison facing persecution and execution for being a Christian.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Find relief in the cross of Jesus. If you suffer sickness, trials, temptations, or loss, know that God disciplines His children whom He loves, and He has promised to carry the burdens which you cannot carry – and He has carried them. If you have success, victory, health, wealth, and happiness, know that He is a gracious God who likes to give good gifts to His children. And don't be anxious that these things are going to be taken away, because we know they will go away because God's Word is the only thing in this world which is

eternal. Be content, no matter what the day brings, because you know what you have in Christ.

So Paul says, “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” What he is saying is that to have patience and grace should be the standard default response no matter what the day brings. Don’t be hasty to judge. Don’t be easily offended when things are not going according to your plan. Participate in a patient and gracious approach to others. Splashing water in the face of a drowning man in order to get his attention will not bring peace to anyone.

Do the unexpected. Give an unexpected, gracious response. That is how you participate in the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. Forgive the undeserving. Be gracious to the ungrateful. Do to others what God has done to you.

I cannot command you to be joyful, be content, be at peace. The peace of God surpasses all understanding. Keeping your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus is the only way the Holy Spirit can allow you to even approach the air of peace we will breathe in the life to come. Until then, I can only give you what God has given:

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen.