

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Pentecost 20
Saturday, October 14, 2023, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, October 15, 2023, at 9:00 a.m.

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

Philippians 4:4-13

When you read 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.’” Yet, you struggle; and you don’t feel joy or peace or contentment amidst the chaos. 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 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 that he saw.

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. Your medulla oblongata won’t let you. (It’s part of your brain stem). God created you so that you don’t have to think about living. In eternity, having peace and contentment will be just as natural as your heart beating and lungs breathing.

Being at peace, having true joy and contentment here on earth is not natural. There is no part of the brain that automatically makes that happen. 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.”

At our pastor’s conference a couple of weeks ago, we discussed Paul writing about “koinonia” – fellowship, participation in the things of God, which we have heard over the past few weekends in our Epistle readings from Philippians. 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 of Word and Sacrament. I am the drowning man to whom God has 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. I know what I have done. I know what a sinner I am. I know where I would be in this life and the life to come without the undeserved grace of God. I do not deserve to take my next breath. I am the drowning man to whom God has said, “Breathe.”

He has carried the burdens which we cannot carry. And He has blessed us with so much more than the breath of life and our daily bread. If you have success, victory, health, wealth, and happiness, know that you have a gracious Father 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 in Christ you have what is true, honorable, just, pure, and worthy of praise.

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. 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. Share the unexpected air of peace with your fellow drowning neighbor. 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. As Paul says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Even in the midst of this sea of chaos, I can breathe the air of peace because it has been given to me by the Prince of Peace. Amen.