

Circumstances change in the world. Sometimes things are good. Sometimes they're wonderful. And sometimes they're not good at all.

In my life I've grown up with the Cold War, and Vietnam, and Watergate, a couple of Gulf Wars, with September 11, with a couple of big recessions.

I've also seen times of great economic prosperity. I remember the collapse of the Soviet Union and European communism. I remember the jubilation when the Berlin Wall came down.

It's like living on a roller coaster. You might hope the good times will last, but they don't last forever. You may think the bad times will never end, but eventually they do.

And now we have global pandemic. We have an extremely divided country, with greater polarization than I've seen in my lifetime. We have folks on both ends of the political spectrum who apparently agree on only one thing—that if folks from the other side get elected in November it will be the end of the American Republic as we know it.

And yet, none of us knows what the future will bring. None of us knows how events will play out. We make guesses and contingency plans. But we still ride the roller coaster of successive waves of bad events and good events.

There's an ancient Chinese proverb that deals with changing circumstances. It goes like this.

2,300 years ago, there was an old farmer who lived on the frontier. One day his only horse ran away. The neighbors said, "What terrible luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

A few days later, the horse returned home from the frontier, accompanied by a wild horse, thus doubling the number of horses the farmer owned. The neighbors said, "What great luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

Later that week, the farmer's son was trying to break the new horse, but it bucked him off, breaking the young man's leg. The villagers cried, "What terrible luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

The next week, the army marched through town, conscripting all the able-bodied young men into service. But the farmer's son had a broken leg, and so he was not drafted. Friends shouted, "What tremendous luck!" To which the farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

This story points to the fact that circumstances continually change in life. And yet we're often not in a position to be able to judge ahead of time whether those changes will be good or bad, unhelpful or helpful. The future usually plays out differently than we expect.

We're in the 4th and final week of a series of 4 readings excerpted from the 4 chapters of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians. And we hear Paul's advice when facing uncertain times.

Today we hear Paul say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

You may be tempted to say, "Rejoice? Don't worry? That may be easy for you Paul, but I live in the real world. And it's a real mess right now."

But Paul was NOT living in some sort of Never-Never La-La Land, with a bunch of happy Smurfs dancing around flowery fields with unicorns.

Paul lived in the Roman Empire, a military dictatorship.

Paul was writing to the Philippians, a church that had considerable gifts, but also was experiencing a fair amount of internal division and some growing external persecution.

And Paul was writing from prison. Paul was awaiting a trial on capital charges—if he won, he'd be released—if he lost, he'd be beheaded.

So Paul lives in the real world, not some sort of fantasy land. But he still says, "Do not worry about anything." And he still says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

I'd love to have a full sermon to tease this out in detail. But I'm trying to preach shorter sermons during the pandemic. So here's the shorter version.

We often confuse joy with some sort of perfect world where everything is constantly "up" and "wonderful" and "happy." That's NOT what Paul is talking about.

Joy and rejoicing are about holding on to something through the highs and lows that life's circumstances will bring.

The Chinese farmer in the proverb holds on to a sense of stoicism, a sort of "wait and see" attitude.

But Paul is talking about something different. The joy Paul is talking about does not come from experiencing only good things in life. And the joy Paul speaks of is not grounded in some sort of hands-off stoic attitude like the Chinese farmer has.

The joy Paul talks about is NOT about avoiding pain or suffering or life's difficulties.

Instead, joy is found by hanging onto something specific in the midst of pain and changing circumstances and the difficulties life can bring. In the midst of changes, it is about maintaining a connection to something that doesn't change.

It is about being tethered, being rooted, having an anchor point. Paul talks about this connectedness as the peace of God,¹ which is a gift from the God of peace.²

If you live only for pleasure, then you will be knocked off track by the pain life can bring.

If you live only for happiness, then you will be knocked off track by loss and grief.

But if you live your life for God, if you anchor yourself in God, if you tether your lifeline to God, then you will be able to hold onto joy in the midst of suffering and pain.

This may be counterintuitive. That's why Paul calls it the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. And we have used this verse in Philippians for centuries as a final blessing prayer.

In Paul's words,
"The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."³

The God of peace offers the peace of God, which acts to guard our hearts and minds. This is very much a military term. Guarding something. Keeping it safe. Guarding our hearts and minds from the fears and anxieties that life's circumstances bombard us with.

In Philippians Paul wants us to live like Christ does, to seek to think the way Christ thinks, to act the way Christ acts.

And if we do that, we can remain tethered to Christ and anchored in Christ in good times and bad, no matter what happens to us.

If we do that, the God of peace will give us the peace of God that will guard our hearts and minds, no matter what.

¹ Phil 4:7

² Phil 4:9

³ Phil 4:7