

# The Choice to Rejoice

Matt Laney

**“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”** Philippians 4:4

Rejoice? Seriously, Paul? Obviously you didn’t live in a time where people get mowed down at worship or at a concert or at a march for peace; a time when our leader flaunts bullying, racism and environmental rollbacks; a time when executives and stock holders get richer while workers are left further behind; a time when a child dies from hunger every ten seconds.

Rejoice? Don’t be naive, Pastor Paul.

Reading this cheery ancient scripture next to dreary current headlines, we have to remind ourselves that Paul’s world was awash in despots, destruction and despair, far more than ours. He knew all about hardship.

Maybe that’s why Paul tells the Philippian church to rejoice twice. When I repeat myself, it’s usually because I want to emphasize my point . . . or because I can’t think of anything else to say. Never short of something to say, Paul repeated himself to

emphasize the discipline of rejoicing as an act of resistance when injustices and struggles pile up.

In fact, Paul uses the words “joy” and “rejoice” 15 times in this letter. Did I mention Paul was in prison when he wrote it? That’s leading by example. He said if he should be sentenced to death, he would still rejoice. I’m reminded of young people singing joyfully in jail during the civil rights movement and of a friend who battled cancer with laughter and levity until it took her life.

This sort of rejoicing isn’t a form of denial. Neither is it an exercise in the power of positive thinking. It is an expression of holy resistance, refusing to let hardships rob us of our joy in the Lord. If we do that much, we triumph, even if we die.

**Just for today, Lord of all, let me rejoice in you always. Again I say, rejoice!**

# In Body or Spirit

Vince Amlin

**“People were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’ Then some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’ But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, ‘..Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ —he then said to the paralytic— ‘stand up . . . .’”** Matthew 9:2-6

“Your daughter is special needs, right?”

“Uh . . .” I sputtered and paused. This was the first time I had heard that term used to describe Nola. Maybe the question shouldn’t have been so hard to answer. At 2 1/2 she can’t walk or speak intelligibly.

But this label, which I have used of others, seemed so inadequate to capturing the smart, funny, indomitable little girl I know.

I have always thought about this story of Jesus as a story of physical healing. A paralyzed man gets to walk. It’s not about that at all.

A man who is paralyzed is carried to him, and Jesus’ response is to forgive him. It’s only when the scribes balk that Jesus turns to outward healing.

In my ableism, I miss the point. Like Matthew, I label the man as the paralytic. I assume that walking must be his real hope. I think of him as special needs, but Jesus calls him son. Jesus treats him as a full person—full of faith and sin—and takes the man’s burden away. Just like I’d want him to do for me.

**Defier of Labels, teach me to meet my neighbors in their fullness.**



# Love and Let Go

T o n y R o b i n s o n

**“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on the mountain that I shall show you.”** Genesis 22:2

This story, most often referred to as “the sacrifice of Isaac” (Genesis 22:1-15) is a tough one.

In the face of God’s demand (later rescinded) to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, we recoil—as indeed we should.

And some say they want nothing to do with such a God. I get it.

But if we stick with it, and resist an overly literal interpretation, this story has urgent questions for us in this time of so much change, loss and anxiety about the future.

“Isaac” stands for those good gifts of God in which we find our identity and our future.

What if we must give those up? What if they are taken from us? What then? Who are we then?

I know a congregation who love their 150-year-old church building. Who they are is bound up with that beautiful, impossible building. If they give that building up, who will they be then?

Loss of a job or the end of a career raises these questions too. I (mostly) loved congregational ministry. What happens when that is given up? Who am I then?

For some of us “Isaac” is a job or career. For others “Isaac” is their family. For still others, “Isaac” may be a longtime home. “Isaac” may even be the once true, but now not true, story we tell ourselves about who we are and how life works.

We are right to love God’s good gifts, as indeed “Abraham loved Isaac.” But what happens when they are surrendered or lost? Who are we then? Is God still God? Does our trust lie in the gifts or in the Giver? That is the question this story asks.

I am here to testify that even when we surrender those good gifts that have defined us, God is still God. We may find that our life did not depend on those gifts but on the living God, who is not finished with any of us yet.

Help us to love your good gifts and to let them go. Amen.

