

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“THE FOUR SEASONS WE CAN EXPECT”

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TEXT: Philippians 4:10-13

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It's one of my favorite cartoons. Lucy says to Charlie Brown: “Sometimes I get discouraged.” “Well, Lucy,” he says, “life does have its ups and downs, you know.” “But why?” says Lucy. “Why should it? Why can't my life be all 'ups'? If I want all 'ups,' why can't I have them? Why can't I just go from an 'up' to an 'upper up?’” Charlie Brown mumbles: “I can't stand it.”

We laugh at Lucy, because we know what Charlie Brown knows: in every life there are downs. As a child in Dublin, Georgia, I discovered that my favorite minor league baseball team, the Dublin Orioles, did *not* win every game. As a teenager, I discovered that there were girls who did *not* want to go out with me. As a young adult, I discovered that when the honeymoon is over, it's over. My selfish tendencies were not magically cured by getting married. As older adults, we all rediscover our mortality. There are no exceptions.

And so my question today is this: why does Paul say in Philippians, chapter 4, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (v. 4 NIV). Is he saying that in his life there are only ups and upper ups? Does he never have a rotten day? Is he telling us that we should try to wear a plastic smile in times of tragedy? Surely not, we say. But Paul is emphatic. He says in verse 12: “In any and every situation I have learned the secret of being content, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want” (NIV). He could have added, “whether I am free or in prison,” because Paul is writing to the Philippians from a jail cell.

“I have learned the secret,” he tells us. The secret of contentment. What does he mean? The answer for Paul is in Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through [the One] who strengthens me.” I can do all things, not in my own strength, but rather through a power greater than myself.

On the 10th of April, 1963, a U.S. nuclear submarine was lost about 200 miles east of Boston. Some of you may remember the story of the *USS Thresher*. There were 129 men on board as the *Thresher* put out to sea for a deep-diving exercise. The exercise was a failure. Within fifteen minutes the submarine sent an emergency message. Something was terribly wrong. Later it was learned that the *USS Thresher* broke into six major sections. The pressure of the water was so great that either the casting or the welding failed. All hands on board went to their death because the internal strength of the submarine was not great enough to withstand the pressure. What Paul is saying is that we will not be crushed by the pressures we face, if we are in Christ, if we know that God is able to give us strength beyond our human strength.

This is not the power of positive thinking in a simplistic way. If you were on that submarine and you learned that the integrity of the ship was in question, you would not be saved by thinking happy thoughts. If you were taking an organic chemistry exam without studying, you would not be saved by happy thoughts. Happy thoughts do not keep our friends and loved ones from dying. We are not talking about a shallow kind of positive thinking. We are talking about “the

everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the Earth, [who] does not faint or grow weary, [whose] understanding is unsearchable, [who] gives power to the faint” (Isaiah 40:28-29). We are talking about the Lord of life and death. “For I am convinced,” Paul says in Romans, chapter 8, “that . . . [nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 38-39).

Think about it. If you could hear Christ praying for you in the next room, you would not be afraid. And the fact is, according to Hebrews, chapter 7, he *is* praying for you and me constantly (v. 25). We need not fear a million enemies.

So how do we experience this strength that leads to contentment? Let’s look at the four seasons that all of us can expect.

We can expect the hopeful season of **spring**. Springtime is when the brown snow is replaced by vibrant green. The Cubs are in first place – they have no wins and no losses! We are able to say with excitement: “This may be the year!” Last Wednesday I saw a young man wearing a sign at a park district event. A homemade sign. It read: “Free hugs.” He was laughing and making everybody around him laugh, grandmothers and kids and me. When it’s springtime, we feel like hugging the whole world. Can we remember to give thanks to God in the hopeful seasons of our life? “O give thanks to the Lord, for [God] is good, for [God’s] steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 136:1).

Next comes the satisfied season of **summer**. It’s not an exuberant time, like spring. Instead, we experience the quiet satisfaction of knowing: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). Summertime is when God blesses us with green pastures, when God leads us beside still waters. Can we remember in the satisfied seasons that “every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17)?

Autumn is the unsettled season. We know that change is in the air. “My kids are leaving home. What will it be like?” “My job is changing. I feel anxious.” “My marriage is not as satisfying as it used to be. What should I do?” The good news when it feels like autumn is this: everything changes except the goodness of God. “Jesus Christ is the same,” the New Testament tells us, “yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Can we remember the One who does not change?

And then we come to what I call my fourth favorite season. We all know that **winter** is unavoidable. Even if we lived in Hawaii, we would not be able to escape the winter season of the soul. I once went through three years of continuous winter. I prayed more than ever during those three years, because I had to pray to stay alive. I shared my hurt and my anger with a few trusted friends and with my amazingly supportive wife. I discovered not by reading a book but by living the pain that God is faithful in the dark night, even in the wintertime of the soul.

And so I invite you this morning to pray with me the Covenant Prayer of John Wesley, who knew – like Paul, like all of us who are open to God’s grace – that we can be content in Christ. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter. “I can do all things through the One who strengthens me.”