

The Third Sunday of Advent
Gaudete Sunday
December 15, 2024
Zephaniah 3:14-20, Canticle 9, Philippians 4:4-7,
Luke 3:7-18

The Sunday of Joy

You probably noticed that when we lit the Advent wreath earlier in the service, the final candle we lit, for the third Sunday of Advent, is pink. This Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, is known as Rose Sunday, or Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the opening antiphon of the Mass for this Sunday is “Rejoice (Gaudete) in the Lord always.” The tradition of marking this Sunday carried over into the Episcopal and Lutheran traditions as well. The purple hue of the Advent candles on the wreath is lightened up to pink for this Sunday, as a sign of the gradual shift in focus from waiting, watchfulness, and repentance to anticipation, expectation and joy, for we rejoice in the imminent arrival of Emmanuel, the Word made flesh, to make his home in our world and in our hearts.

At first glance, there aren't a lot of visible signs of joy in our world. Wars and threats of wars are proliferating in the world, and the

conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine still rage. Gun violence is still rampant in our own country, with schoolyards, streets, and idyllic holiday festivals being transformed into sites of sorrow and death. The gap between the wealthiest and the poorest is growing, with those on the margins being routinely denied a place at the table, unwanted, made invisible, devalued. Political divisions are hardening into impenetrable barriers, so that those of differing views consider those on the other side as enemies, and mistrust and fear deepen. Discrimination against people on the basis of their immigration status, gender, race, age, and sexual orientation is increasing.

And yet, this is called the Sunday of joy. Why? What is joy? Is it just happiness, a state where we feel content because things are going well for us, or in the world? Is joy that state when things are on top of the world for us, when we are in vibrant health, our career is taking off, we are in love, our children are succeeding? Is joy being happy about being able to take the vacation of our dreams every year? These are things to be thankful for, but they are different than joy. Happiness is fleeting and is dependent on circumstances. Circumstances can change

on a dime. An accident can take away our good health and independence in seconds. Job loss can cause financial struggles. Natural disasters can befall our communities. Relationships can go through rough spots and communication can break down. No, when St. Francis talks about perfect joy, and Paul in his letter to the Philippians tells his fellow believers to “Rejoice in the Lord always, they are getting at something else, something deeper, something more lasting. Joy, it seems, is not dependent about what is going on around us, or a passing state, but is grounded in the good news of the absolute certainty of God’s grace and great love for us, that nothing can ever take away. As we read in Romans Chapter 8, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It was this kind of unshakeable joy that made it possible for early Christians to walk through fear and know peace as they went to their deaths in the arena. It is this joy that led St Francis of Assisi to rejoice in Mother Earth, Brother Fire, Sister Moon, and Sister Death as he asked to

be laid on his beloved soil before he died. It is this joy that allowed Victor Frankl to survive a Holocaust concentration camp with his humanity, and gift of compassion intact. It is this joy that allowed Martin Luther King to proclaim he had a dream, even in the midst of threats and oppression. And it is this joy that raises people up from bleak outer circumstances to live lives of love and purpose, miracles happening among us every day if we have the eyes to see.

In my own life, over the past few months, I have known great joy. It has not all been easy; there were a lot of major changes in my life over the past year, and several people in my family have gone through some health challenges that brought quite a bit of suffering. These are some of my closest relationships, so I'm grieving with them, in a sense. And yet, a vein of joy also runs through my life, because I know that I'm not alone, that Jesus is on the journey beside me, and that his love is never-ending. And one of the greatest joys has been coming to this community, and getting to know all of you, and the wonderful staff and children of Sea Breeze School, and to know that we truly walk through times of pain, sorrow, fear, hope, joy, and peace, together. I am so

grateful to all of you for the joy you bring to my life. Joy, then, transcends even the most difficult outward circumstances, because it depends not on what is happening around us but is grounded in the love of God and the love that we have for one another in the Body of Christ.

I believe true joy comes from going through hard things and finding the presence of God in the midst of the chaos, the doubt, the fear. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul asks his hearers to “Rejoice in the Lord Always, and again I say rejoice. The Lord is near. Don’t worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” He doesn’t say rejoice in the Lord when we’ve got the world by the tail or rejoice when things are going our way. He doesn’t say rejoice when we feel like it, but always. And that is because the rejoicing is not based on our success, or the accidents of fate, but on the character of God in Christ, which is goodness, forgiveness, grace, and everlasting love. And this isn’t some kind of pollyannish pretending everything is fine when it’s not. For notice that it says “but *in* everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. It doesn’t say to

give thanks for everything. What we are asked to do is to rejoice that God is greater than our circumstances, that Jesus walks with us in and through our fear and pain, and that we are ultimately safe because nothing can ever overcome his love.

We can also know true joy in repentance and returning to God after we have wandered. At first glance, it seems that John's preaching in the beginning of our Gospel lesson is anything but joyful good news. But even in the midst of his warning, of calling people a brood of vipers and the threat of cutting down trees that don't bear good fruit, there is good news. People ask John what to do to avoid the wrath to come, and he tells them to care for the poor, to walk with justice and honesty and a spirit of equity. And as people came with expectation and hope to be baptized by John, they hear the great good news that he is the forerunner, the one to make the crooked places straight, and the rough places plain, to prepare the way of the Lord when he comes. This is the One who is more powerful, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, and fire, who will clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary and will burn the chaff. So, the good news is that God is forever

making a way for us who have wandered, who have turned away, to find the way home. Through Christ and in Christ, God is forever seeking us out. We need not even fear the refining fire, for it will clear away that what obscures the beautiful image of God that is in all people.

So, on this third Sunday of Advent, when the days are short, dark, and cold, let us rejoice and be filled with hope. For the Holy One is coming once again to dwell in our flesh, to share our very life with us, and of his kingdom, there is no end. Amen.