

Year B, Advent 3  
December 13, 2020  
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“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

“May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

That’s the Epistle indicated for today, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent. We read the Isaiah (you can’t have Advent 3 without the Isaiah), but St. Paul’s words are important to hear today.

Let’s start with the Angelus again, that great Advent prayer.

Please pray with me:

V. The angel of the Lord announced unto Mary.

**R. And she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

**R. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.**

V. Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

**R. Be it unto me according to your Word.**

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

**R. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.**

V. And the Word was made flesh.

**R. And dwelt among us.**

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

**R. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.**

V. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

**R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.**

V. Let us pray: Pour your grace into our hearts, O Lord, that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary, may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN

Good morning. A blessed third Sunday of Advent to you. The scripture this time of year is just astounding. We have the words of Isaiah.

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted...”

The psalmist gives us:

“When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, \*  
then were we like those who dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter, \*  
and our tongue with shouts of joy...”

The alternative response to Isaiah this week is the Magnificat. “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior...” The lowly are lifted, the mighty cast down, the hungry are filled, the rich sent away empty. It doesn’t get any better than that, scripture-wise. We’ll hear the whole thing next week.

The epistle, which is from 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, was short. What I read was the whole thing, a great example of Paul’s occasional economy of words. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances..”

And then there is St. John the Evangelist's account of St. John the Baptist's arrival on the Galilean religious scene. "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." How exciting!

Do you sense a theme emerging? The third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday and is marked with the outward and visible sign of the pink candle in our Advent wreath and pink or rose vestments, but we don't have that set. This Sunday gets its name from the traditional Latin Introit, "*Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, Gaudete,*" which is from the letter to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice." This day parallels the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Laetare Sunday, in serving as a 7<sup>th</sup> inning stretch in a penitential season. Today, we are called to lift our heads from our pensive Advent gaze, and as our lectionary tells us in all sorts of ways, to rejoice!

Even in the best of times, Christian rejoicing as proclaimed by the prophets, apostles and evangelists isn't some happy-clappy Sponge Bob Square Pants Christmas or any other season goofiness. There might be a place for silliness in our lives, but it is not something to be spiritually emphasized or religiously practiced. Like I said last week, the tone of Advent unto Christmas tide rejoicing is in the key of Linus. \* "That is what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." That is the proper Christmas tone in even the best of times.

And we are not in the best of times. The 2020 litany of the COVID pandemic, our politics and our economy keeps beating, relentlessly. And now we are in the holiday season. We lost Easter back in April, and Thanksgiving, and now Christmas will be upside-down. As Eliza Hamilton lamented, "Unimaginable!" No, we didn't/won't lose the days. Like Bishop Curry preached in April, even though it didn't look like Easter, or smell like Easter, or feel like Easter, it was Easter anyway. It is Advent, it will be Christmas, but goodness, don't for a second discount how difficult it is to have holidays disrupted as they are being disrupted on top of so many lives that have already been disrupted for 10 months. Unimaginable. Our church life, the life of our families, interruption of maybe generations of tradition... This is a hard time, the disruption of the holidays is making it harder and this holiday surge of the virus is making it harder still.

There are glimmers of hope... The vaccines are coming. New leadership will have a chance to try different approaches to public health, hopefully they'll have better luck. We have each other. This bizarre way to do church is working. It is not perfect, but we are caring for each other, blessing and praising God, helping neighbors, spreading joy. That is all true.

It is also true that the vaccines are going to take a long time, and some elected officials who swore to uphold and defend the Constitution aren't, Congress isn't helping the economy, and

though this church thing is going well, it is going to be hard on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, they'll be, so different, like so much else in our lives, soooo different. And yet we are called to rejoice... rejoice always, even.

And Paul means it. So do the Isaiah, the Psalmist, John. We are supposed to rejoice. The call is not to "fake it until you make it." You know, just act like you are rejoicing or have things to rejoice about and maybe life will follow suit, or maybe you'll get back on track. That is not the lesson of Gaudete Sunday.

It is not like laugh clubs. You remember those from the 90s? Laughing is good for us, body, mind and spirit, and movement began in to foster the health benefits of laughter. "Ha-ha-hee-hee-ha." Say that with me. "Ha-ha-hee-hee-ha." "Hee-hee-ha-ha" We are mimicking the physiological aspect of laughter, which is good for our bodies, but then pretty quickly we are just laughing, which is good for the rest of us. That is really fun, but that is not what we are called to today, to fool ourselves into rejoicing, even if it becomes genuine.

What we are called to do is to believe. Not up here in our head, but to believe in, to trust, to have faith in the truth that our ancestors have passed down to us. They felt these things, hope, joy, giving thanks in all things, knowing that those who wept at the sowing will reap with songs of joy. This joy was all very real to the ones who call on us to rejoice this day, and you know what, what is really striking about the people who give us these enduring words of joy? They weren't writing in the best of times, either.

Isaiah's context was the Babylonian exile. There were moments of hope, but they were in bondage. Paul spent a goodly part of his ministry being beaten or on his way to Rome to stand trial. And the 2<sup>nd</sup> century when John was writing was a terribly difficult time to be Jewish or Christian. Hard to rejoice when a lion is nibbling on you or fellow church members in the arena. And yet, the wisdom, the instructions they offer to us is to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." How do we do that today, authentically, honestly rejoice? With the truth of what is really happening in our world and our lives, right now, how do we rejoice and not be just gladhanding ourselves?

Last week we spoke of "hopeful anticipation." What these texts call us to do today is to rejoice in anticipation, rejoice in anticipation for what God has already done in the future. Did you catch that? We are called to rejoice in what God has already done in the future. Let that sink in. You hear people speak of a moment of Zen, incongruous, paradoxical yet true... Zen Buddhists got nothing on us. We need to rejoice in anticipation for what God has already done in in the future.

One of the 20 century's great preachers and biblical commentators, Fred Craddock, puts that mystical sentiment this way: "To celebrate the future as a memory, and to praise God for having already done what lies before us to do, is the nature of life as the people of God." I'll say that again: "To celebrate the future as a memory, and to praise God for having already done what lies before us to do, is the nature of life as the people of God." The future as memory... Already done what lies before us... Great is the mystery of faith!

Unlike some other religious understandings, for instance in Buddhism which holds that time is cyclical, the Christian conception of time is linear. There was a beginning, there is now, there will be an end; world without end. Holy Scripture is a record of God's continuing revelation of God's self to people across history. And while God certainly manifests in history, with Abraham, Moses, the prophets, there are so many ways that happened, and of course most definitively and spectacularly in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God is not bound by history, God's activity and presence is not constrained by time, certainly not our experience of time. That is good theology and also good physics.

This ight sound new but we flirt with this every Sunday. In Eucharistic Prayer B we say:

We remember Christ's death,  
We proclaim Christ's resurrection,  
We await Christ's coming in glory...

This is called the Anamnesis. In this moment of the Mass we are not retelling an historic event or predicting an uncertain future. What we are really doing in that moment in the Mass is collectively *remembering* a common past, as a people we are remembering. And as that memory is real, as real as any memory you have in your own heart, so the look ahead is as real, we remember that it has happened in the future. It is complete, everything. This is the blessed assurance of God. Try that on. Rejoice because everything's alright, everything will all work out exactly as it should, in fact it already has, so rejoice! We're not ignoring the pain of right now, the suffering and injustice we will inevitably experience, but just take that despair and hopelessness off the table for God's promise is fulfilled.

I hope I haven't lost you. I can get carried away out in the philosophic stratosphere, so let's bring it down to Earth. We are called to rejoice because when God promises us things, a promise we receive and believe in faith, it is done. This is what Julian of Norwich was getting at when she wrote, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." She's talking about in the fullness of time, which is as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever.

Or think of it this way: In being promised by God, the promise is kept as it is made, it just hasn't happened in any way we can ask or imagine, yet. However, in the mystery of Jesus Christ we can experience the joy of a promise fulfilled. Like the fact that you are saved. You are, so act like it. God's promise is not just as good as done, it is done, it will just take us progressing to the fullness for time for us to experience it. In the mystery of Christ we can remember the wonder and joy of our Creator who loves us, our Savior who reconciles us, our Spirit who animates the very light and life of existence. Rejoice always, indeed.

What does this mean for us on Gaudete Sunday in COVID time? The long and the short of it is faith. We gotta have faith. Faith that the experience of those who came before us is true. Faith that the promises they relate to us have already been kept. Faith that we will be worthy of the promises of Christ. Faith that though we can't see the path, that we likely won't live to see its completion, that it is also likely it will be hard and full of suffering, that all shall be well. Promises will be kept. By grace and love salvation is offered and received. And all of that because it is already true, even if it hasn't happened for us, yet. It will be as it was meant to be, in fact it already is future is we remember it. That, seeing, knowing the world in this way, that is in the Commonwealth or Kingdom of God. And that is right here, very near to us, very near. Rejoice always! AMEN.