

Year B Advent 3 John 1:6-8, 19-28 Dare to Rejoice!

Today's other readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; The Song of Mary (Canticle 18); 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Today is Gaudete Sunday – Gaudete is a Latin word that means “Rejoice” and comes from Paul’s well-known bit in his letter to the Philippians that says, “Rejoice in the Lord always” and again I say rejoice. Those words begin the traditional Roman Catholic mass for today and so the Sunday eventually took on the name. Today is Rejoice Sunday.

This is one of those rare Sundays when all of the readings have the same theme. Today it’s the theme of rejoicing. Not the happy, bubbly sort that you feel when you get a good parking spot but the deep joy that comes from the sure and certain hope that God will fulfill his promises. Because, when you look closer you’ll realize that these same people who today we find rejoicing, could just as easily be depressed, discouraged, and worried about the future.

“Rejoice always!” Paul says in his letter to the persecuted believers in Thessalonica. It sounds like strange advice to give to people who were experiencing anger and even physical violence from the people in their town who were not Christians like them. But, as someone who had endured suffering – a lot of suffering – Paul knows very well that it is not about feeling happy, about being on cloud nine, but about the joy that rises quietly from within, from our personal trust in God and from the sense that God is with us. That is true joy, for it happens even when circumstances are difficult. It is a joy that comes even in the midst of deep suffering and sustains us in life’s dark times.

In Isaiah today we hear the prophet sing a hymn of joy filled with images of great hope to the people of Israel and the canticle we said together echoes this. The Israelites were returning to their homeland after a long period of exile. They were returning to heaps of rubble instead of the beautiful cities and towns their parents and grandparents had been dragged away from many years earlier. They brought home with them their passion for their homeland and they had all the material things they needed to rebuild their lives but they were discouraged.

They felt that God had abandoned them, they had forgotten God's promises, and they didn't feel close to God anymore. Isaiah reminded them that God will always be faithful to them, will always keep his promises to them. Isaiah restored their faith and hope and gave them back their joy that comes from trusting in the Lord. In the Song of Mary we hear the words of a very young woman, who could have been put to death for becoming pregnant with a child that wasn't Joseph's... we hear this young woman accept with joy the role that God had placed on her – to become the mother of our Saviour – knowing that God was with her, knowing that this was part of God's plan. We hear this young woman singing of the wonderful things God will do as part of this plan. Her rejoicing that springs from her sure and certain hope is clear.

Then we have John the Baptist. He was a prophet born into a time when there were no other prophets and there hadn't been for hundreds of years. He was set apart for his role before he was even born. He was set apart for a life away from friends and family and he could have been lonely and bitter but he wasn't. John was full of joy...the deep joy that comes from the sure and certain that God will fulfill his promises. John rejoiced in the light of the world that he was announcing...rejoiced in the fact that he was nothing compared to the one who was coming.

All of these people we hear from today had troubles and concerns and yet all of them were filled with joy in spite of their less than perfect lives and in spite of the less than perfect world around them. Why? Because they had hope in God. Their hope wasn't the wishful thinking type of hope that we think of today when we hear that word...Gee, I hope the store still has those big tins of coffee on sale by the time I get there. Their hope was a sure and certain hope...the hope of knowing that God was going to fulfill his promises because God had said so. They could see the fulfillment beginning to happen around them and to them. The Israelites had returned home. Mary was pregnant with the Saviour. John was announcing his arrival. Paul was witnessing the growth of God's kingdom. All of them had the odds stacked against them but they had hope and that hope led to joy.

We are in exactly the same position today. These are difficult times in which we live. You can't turn on the news without hearing about scandals and wars and terrorism and people being killed. Closer to home we may have money troubles and family troubles and social problems and racism...Many may wonder what there is to hope for. Where is the joy?

So often, Advent is a forgotten season. It gets lost in the busyness and commercialism of Christmas. That needs to be change. As Christians, we have something important to share with a world in crisis. We know and have experienced that when we find joy and peace, when we turn to God in our grief and sorrow, we are able to face the storms of life. In spite of the bad, we can dare to rejoice...rejoice with confidence that God's promises will be kept...rejoice with the assurance that God is not the cause of such pain. God does not want us to hurt. God does not want his world to hurt. God's will is to be present with us in all that we do; our Emmanuel, God with us. And so we dare to rejoice. We demonstrate our trust through rejoicing, through prayer, and through thankfulness for all that God has done – and will do - in our lives.

Making our message of rejoicing heard is difficult at this time of year. This holy time in our church year is a time which is celebrated by the secular world, the world outside of the Church, but often without any real understanding of what is being celebrated. The world does not really listen to our message - the Christmas tree is simply a festive decoration. The lights, the presents, the Christmas t.v. shows and movies – that sort of stuff doesn't need our message in order to happen.

But amazingly even when Christmas is completely secularized the image of the mother and the child in the manger never really disappears. It appeals to people. They like the feelings of happiness surrounding Christmas. They appreciate the warm 'fuzzies'. They greet each other in a different way –full of warmth and love. They like the sense of celebration and, in a non-pandemic time, many non-churchgoers head out to church. It is a time of outreach to the poor and to those in need – donations to charities skyrocket at this time of year. And for a little

while the world is a better place, although we know that those feelings will not last.

The reason it doesn't last is because it is not rooted in God's call to service. A lot of those who honour our Saviour at Christmas do not actually truly know him. Celebrating Christmas without knowing the great Story of Salvation is like the workers on the Titanic busily rearranging furniture for the morning while the ship is headed for the iceberg. The Church is called to reach out with the gospel message, to bring our amazing story to those so very much in need of the hope and joy it will bring into their lives. Although we may feel like a voice crying out in the wilderness, we are not alone. God is with us. Let that transform our actions during this approach Christmas. Dare to rejoice during this holy season...