

3rd Sunday of Advent “Joy is a Gift from God, and Sometimes...a Defiant Choice”

Fr. Frank Schuster

As we approach Christmas, we listen to Christmas carols on the radio and in every place we shop. There are Christmas parties, family gatherings, and newsletters to send out. We hear the words, “Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays everywhere we go. And we are hopeful for a Merry Christmas, as we should be, but there are also worries and anxieties, grievances and sorrows that threaten happiness during this time of year as well. And, at times, we can wonder whether our Christmas will be joyful? The Church offers her perspective on joy on the third Sunday of Advent.

Zephaniah proclaims in our first reading, “Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” St. Paul proclaims in our second reading, “Brothers and sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!” Even our Gospel reading concludes with St. John the Baptist preaching good news to the people. The message is clear. The mark of a disciple is a person of joy. What makes their message more interesting is the historical context by which they encourage us to be joyful.

Zephaniah is writing in the 7th century before Christ, during the reign of King Josiah, only a couple of decades before the destruction of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile. The warning signs were very clear as their Jewish identity had been watered down due to the growing influence of foreign religions favoring Astarte and Baal. It didn’t take a crystal ball to see that Israel was declining and Babylon was rising. King Josiah made his career doing his best to purify the Jewish faith throughout his reign.

For prophets like Zephaniah and his contemporary Jeremiah, this was all too little and too late. They could see the overwhelming destruction on the horizon. They also had the faith to see that Jerusalem would one day rise from the ashes of defeat, that the Kingdom of God would shine justice on their world and that there would be salvation for their people. This is the context of Zephaniah’s proclamation in our first reading, “Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel!” What he is essentially saying is, although we are going to know suffering and defeat, our people will also one day experience the salvation of God, a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is essentially saying, even though the world can get dark, we are defiantly joyful. You hear this theme from me from time to time, the idea of defiant joy. Scripture, like we have today, is the reason why.

The same can be said for St. Paul when he invites the Philippians, “Brothers and sisters: rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!” What is the context here? The most dangerous time to be a Christian was in the first three centuries of Christianity and St. Paul is writing to Philippi only a couple decades after the resurrection. You see, it was illegal to be a Christian because under Roman law citizens were required to worship the Roman emperor as a deity. Christians would pray for the health and well-being of the emperor but would not worship

the emperor. This is because of the first commandment and our solemn belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Caesar didn't like this very much so the rise of Christianity led to great persecutions and gory martyrdoms that were meant to discourage others from being a Christian. Of course, as we know, by the grace of God and the witness of the martyrs, these persecutions had the opposite effect and several centuries later Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. This happened because the early Christians were a defiantly joyful people.

St. Paul, when he was writing to the Philippians, knew that he was living on borrowed time and that his martyrdom was coming soon. He also knew the hardships and persecutions the Christians of Philippi were going to endure. It is in this context that St. Paul proclaims, "Brothers and sisters: rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness shall be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." What St. Paul is saying, no matter how dark the world can get, be a defiantly joyful people.

Why do I mention the historical settings for our first two readings? The reason is because this weekend we celebrate Gaudate Sunday. Gaudate is Latin for "rejoice". We mark this Sunday by lighting the rose colored candle. The priest typically wears a rose colored vestment. This is the time during Advent, our time of vigil leading up to Christmas, when we recognize in the darkness Christ's victory. Even though the days are getting darker and darker, even though our country continues to be divided, even though we may be personally dealing with anxiety or stress, and even though some of us might be suffering an empty chair or two at our Christmas dinner table this year, we call to mind what the world was like during the time of Zephaniah, St. John the Baptist, and St. Paul. Even though we have worries and fears that sometimes bring us justifiably to tears, we boldly listen to their invitation to be defiantly joyful in Christ our Messiah, who offers us meaning in this life and everlasting life in the resurrection. After all, celebrating Christmas makes no sense without our Easter hope.

How do we find joy in a dark world? I believe St. John the Baptist has some excellent recommendations in our Gospel reading. Here was a man who knew his time was short as it was extremely unhealthy to be well known prophet, sticking up for the poor and the defenseless. As we know, he ended up losing his life defending the sanctity of marriage of all things in the face of an unrepentant king. His primary ministry however was what gave him his name "the Baptist". By utilizing water as a symbol of washing away our sins, St. John points to that common experience we all have that can keep us from being happy people. St. John, we remember from last week, was the one who encourages us to level the mountains in our lives that keep us from the future God wants for us. He encourages us fill in the valleys in our lives that keep us from being joyful people.

This week, St. John tells us that the key to happiness begins with essentially choosing to make good and loving choices. If you have two cloaks consider giving one who doesn't have

any. If you are in Government, don't tax more than you have to. If you are a soldier, don't abuse your power. If you are in business, charge only what you need to do business. If you are a lawyer, do not falsely accuse anyone. If you are a worker, be satisfied with fair wages. Essentially, St. John invites us to be joyful and share our joy with others.

St. John makes it clear that his ministry of baptism is a preparation for the one who is to come, the Christ, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. He says, on the day of the Lord's coming, the Lord will gather the wheat into his barn but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. What do we make of this? First of all, I think it is healthy to consider that there are consequences for our actions and our inactions in this life. If we go through our lives choosing to be a conceited self-interested sour puss, why would anyone in heaven want us there? Do you like hanging out with conceited self-interested sour pusses? Why would anyone in heaven like to welcome someone like that for all eternity? On the other hand, if we live our lives choosing to be joyful and intentionally choose to share that joy with others through simple acts of kindness and love, I think the good people of heaven would welcome souls that fit that description with open arms, don't you?

Of course, there is another way to look at the wheat and the chaff in our Gospel reading. On Gaudate Sunday, as we examine our lives in preparation for Christmas, we can ask ourselves what is the wheat in our lives that needs to be joyfully celebrated and encouraged? We should also ask ourselves, what is the chaff in our lives that is keeping us from being joyful people? For Zephaniah, St. Paul and St. John the Baptist, being a joyful person isn't determined by how dark it is, or by the news channel, or by any other current event in our lives. They didn't define their joy on what was happening outside in the world around them. Their joy came from within, from the grace of God. Although they recognized that joy is a grace from the Lord, their witness of life during the times that they lived in say one thing loud and clear, joy is also a choice of the heart. Joy is a choice, sometimes a defiant one, rooted in faith.

As we approach Christmas, we are invited to examine the wheat and chaff in our lives and do some threshing of our own. What are the relationships in our lives that need mending? What are the areas in our lives that need healing? Who are the people in our lives we need to reach out to? Who are the people in our lives we need to be more merciful to? How is our relationship with the person in the mirror? Do we love who we see there? On that note, we will have a wonderful reconciliation service this Tuesday evening. I will have a lot of brother priests here so this will be a joyful opportunity to receive the Lord's forgiveness and grace. And as we fill ourselves with God's grace and joy, we are invited to share God's love with the people around us. My friends, can we spend a little more time each coming day leading up to Christmas doing little things with great love for others and for ourselves? On Gaudete Sunday, if we ask ourselves whether we will have a joyful Christmas, at this point in the Advent season, we recognize that the answer to this question is largely up to us. Yes, joy is a gift from God. How often though is joy also a choice?