

Again I Say Rejoice!¹

A few years ago I started the sermon for the third Sunday of Advent by shouting “Repent” in imitation of John the Baptist scolding the people on the banks of the Jordan River. I continued by calling the congregation “a brood of vipers” just as John did. We had a chuckle at John’s expense before getting down to the serious study of his sermon on repentance. But this is *Gaudete* Sunday, and *Gaudete* means joy or rejoice. It is so important in the liturgy of Advent that we change the color of our candle to rose. We would use rose colored vestments if we had them. The season of Advent is sometimes likened to Lent as a time of penitence, but that is not the essential theme of this season.

Advent is a season of expectation. Because it precedes Jesus’ birth it is often compared to an expectant woman. As the fetus grows within her I imagine she prepares herself for the changes that bearing a new life will bring. Mothers help me with this. What did you ponder or prepare yourself for during the nine months of your pregnancy or in preparing to adopt a child? [how will I care for a child, how will my marriage change, do I want to get married, will he make a good father, will I make a good mother, what will this child be like, can we afford a child, can I keep working, will other dreams have to be deferred or lost because this dream is fulfilled, and so on.] I am sure that there are many other ponderings in addition to these.

I expect that one of the feelings of expectant mothers is of joy. But this is not just happy-go-lucky, careless happiness. This joy comes in the midst of reality. It comes in the midst of all of the questions, uncertainties, and worries of pregnancy and all of the other thoughts and emotions you named.

In the three readings we heard before the gospel today there was a call to joy, but it is important to realize that these calls to joy came in the midst of suffering, oppression, pain, and imprisonment. Our three writers were not naive pie-in-the-sky dopes. They knew the realities of life, but they also knew that the only way through suffering and injustice, and we must go through because we cannot avoid suffering and injustice, the only way through was to have hearts that are centered on God’s joy.

Zephaniah writes during a period of corruption, both religious and political, foisted on the people by the leaders whose job it is to care for them, especially the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. Yet, he urges the people to live in joy in the midst of this corruption and oppression while also calling them to repentance. He is so convinced that God is just and merciful, that they have every reason to center their lives on joy rather than focus on the injustice they suffer now.

The suffering of Zephaniah’s audience does not overshadow the suffering experienced by Isaiah’s initial readers. While not yet in exile in Babylon, they are threatened by the Assyrian empire. This is the empire that had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and dispersed its population. It now breaths fire against Judah. What had once been a great nation under David and Solomon is not but a small remnant surrounded by powerful enemies. Despite all of these Isaiah’s faith in the Lord is not diminished. He begins this poem with the words “Surely it is God who saves me, trusting him I shall not fear.”

¹ I offer deep gratitude to Debie Thomas and the website Journey with Jesus for the insight that inspired this sermon.
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3246>

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For Isaiah joy is not just an internal expression of piety, he calls the people to share it, writing, "Make his deeds known to the people...remember his name...Sing his praises... ring out your joy ... for the great one in the midst of you is the is the Holy One of Israel." Fear, pain, and tribulation exist, but what is most important is Emmanuel, "God with us."

Then there is St. Paul who writes from prison. I do not know of a much more despairing, grinding, and hopeless place than prison. Yet from there Paul shouts out to us to "Rejoice in the Lord always." This is from a man who has been maligned, unjustly tried, shipwrecked, beaten, and stoned. He was also the perpetrator of violence against early believers in Christ, not the least of which was St. Stephen, the first deacon of the Church.

As I have said many times pointing to St. Francis as my example, joy is an inner state that has nothing to do with the circumstances of our lives. We often see this among the poor becomes they do not have the existential comforts that shield them from so much pain and oppression. But we also see rage and violence among the poor who cannot find joy. I wonder where each of us would land if all of our comforts were stripped away.

These three ancient writers coming from different eras and situations all urge us to cultivate joy in the Lord. Joy cannot be taken from you once it grows within you. If we focus our lives on the injustice and pain inflicted by this world we give up hope. If we are so engrossed in the wrongs of society, politics, and the law we defeat ourselves. As the poet writes we end up praising Satan. In his poem, "A Brief for the Defense," the late American poet Jack Gilbert wrote:

"We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,
we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.
We must admit there will be music despite everything."²

Delight, enjoyment, and music give life and make the fight against injustice and evil worth taking up. Our greatest champions for good always had joy in their hearts even in the midst of despair. It was the joy inside Anne Frank, Martin Luther King, the Virgin Mary, St. Teresa of Calcutta, Edith Stein, Maximilian Kolbe, and so many others that they could carry on in the face of evil and violence intended to destroy them and the justice they longed for.

Let us remember the importance of joy like another poet Richard Wilbur who described joy in this way:

"Joy's trick is to supply
Dry lips with what can cool and slake,
Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache
Nothing can satisfy."³

² Excerpt from the poem "A Brief for the Defense" from *Refusing Heaven: Poems*, by Jack Gilbert, copyright © 2005 by Jack Gilbert. Found on the website <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/451/a-brief-for-the-defense>

³ From the poem "Hamlen Brook" by Richard Wilbur found on the Internet Poetry Archive December 11, 2021 https://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/poems/wilbur/hamlen_brook.php