

Sermon for 12/11/11
Advent 3B

Rejoice in the Lord always! And again, I say rejoice! (Philippians 4:4)

The apostle Paul reminds us today in his first letter to the Thessalonians to “rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” “Do not quench the Spirit,” he says, “Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

“And 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”—which is happening soon at Christmastime. “For indeed the one who calls you is faithful”—the Lord, our God—“and He *will* do this.”

So rejoice...without ceasing. Give witness...without ceasing. And praise the Lord...without ceasing.

But perhaps this is a bit much for you today. Why all this rejoicing today, right now? Just because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us?

Maybe you're not in a place to rejoice today or this week or even during this Advent season. Maybe the will of God in Christ Jesus for you is actually something else, you insist. And yet, maybe, nevertheless, God really does want to elicit some rejoicing out of you here on this third Sunday of Advent. Even if in the midst of everything else this seems like an odd time.

And so I stand up here today to bear witness to you that there is a place for rejoicing and that this indeed is a day to embrace it and celebrate it and practice it.

After all, this is the third Sunday of Advent. A Sunday that the Western Church has long known as Gaudete Sunday. A Sunday for rejoicing. The name “gaudete” comes from the Latin verb *gaudeo*, “to rejoice”. The Sunday is named for the original Latin introit for this Sunday, a phrase taken from the fourth chapter of Philippians, which I quoted at the beginning: *Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete*. Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say, rejoice!

If you haven't figured it out by now, today is a day of rejoicing. Traditionally this third Sunday of Advent was to be set apart from the other three as a Sunday of joy. Why? Because traditionally the season of Advent was seen in a similar way as the season of Lent, as a time of penitence and contrition and repentance. And so in the midst of this penitential season, it was seen as necessary to have a Sunday set apart instead for joy. Indeed, Lent has a similar Sunday. The fourth Sunday of Lent is known as Laetare Sunday, from another Latin word meaning “be joyful or rejoice.”

So on both of these Sundays, Gaudete and Laetare Sunday, the Church has traditionally made one minor change to the liturgy. Instead of using the penitential color of purple or violet (or even blue, as some churches use in Advent), on Gaudete and Laetare Sundays the church uses the joyful color rose or pink instead. Some clergy will wear rose-colored vestments and rose-colored hangings may be used. Now unfortunately, neither Kent nor I own any rose-colored vestments or stoles, nor does Trinity have any rose-colored hangings. Certainly their use on just two Sundays a year makes them somewhat impractical. The only real hint that we have today to remind us that it is Gaudete Sunday is the sole pink candle on our Advent wreath which is lit this week. This one, sole pink candle is a small reminder to us that this is indeed a Sunday for rejoicing.

Now I mentioned earlier that traditionally Advent was seen like Lent as a season of penitence. Although it is important to note that really no longer is Advent seen that way. While Lent remains a time of penitence for us as we travel the days to the cross with Jesus to bear the weight of all our sins, Advent is a different matter entirely. Instead of focusing on our penitence during this season, we are supposed to be focusing on our preparedness, on our readiness, on making sure that we're prepared for Christ's first coming in a manger in Bethlehem—and for Christ's second coming when he shall come with glorious power and might to defeat the power of evil once and for all—a time which only God knows.

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And yet, even though Advent is no longer a season of penitence for which a special breaking in of rejoicing is needed, it is still meet and right for us to rejoice on this day, and to give thanks. Indeed, this is one of the roles we play during this season of Advent. In a similar way that John the Baptist plays a role calling us to “make straight the way of the Lord.” In the first chapter of John the Evangelist’s gospel, we are told that John the Baptist came as “a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” And while John “himself was not the light...he came to testify to the light.” That as well is part of the role we play today, as Christians, as followers of Christ, as ones who rejoice and spread the Good News during this season of Advent.

During this time, as we prepare ourselves and our hearts for Christ, we should help others prepare themselves as well. We are to act as witnesses to Christ’s coming, witnesses of the love and joy that is on its way. Witnesses—like John the Baptist—of the light that is coming into the world.

Now there is a lot to be excited and joyful about during this season: family and friends and food and presents and decorations and parties. But sometimes we over-focus on the enjoyment and getting ready for the excitement of Christmas that we forget to turn inwards and explore the joy of Christ in our hearts.

So I ask you this Advent, during this third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, how can we spread joy while still being witnesses to what this season is really, truly about? That this season is about joy and love and sharing with others and helping one another and spreading that light into the dark corners of our and others’ lives; rather than scurrying about, immersed in consumerism, hunting for the best toys and electronics, eating lots of food, and putting out gaudy displays of lights and inflatable decorations.

Can’t we instead be witnesses of the joy that surrounds us and that we take part in through our friendships and interactions here at Trinity as people of God? For we should be witnesses today of the joy that comes to kids who receive presents that we picked and bought and wrapped through our Elf Sunday Christmas Outreach program. And we should be witnesses today of the joy brought to families who will have a turkey or chicken for their holiday dinner or some money to help with their rent or heat through our Tuesday Night Outreach program this season. And some of us will be witnesses this weekend of the joy that comes through song as members of Trinity’s youth group carol at the houses of parishioners on Friday and exchange gifts with one another

And more than that, truly we are witnesses today of God’s love for us because we are able to remember those times when God has been there for us, when friends or family were sick, or dying, or we lost our faith, or we lost our job, or we lost our house, or we went through a divorce, or a move, or a surgery, or any number or kind of life-changing or life-altering experiences...and yet we are still here today to rejoice because God brought us through all those things, because Christ is here among us, and is coming to us, to share with us the life that God has for us.

Because we are witnesses to a gift, of love and joy that came in the person of baby Jesus, the son of Mary, who brought light into our lives, who persevered against all the powers of the world on our behalf, who went to the cross for our sins, who died for our lives, who knew that his light, the Light of the World, couldn’t be extinguished by death, and resurrected rose victoriously to new life again so that we would know that death itself was dead, so that we would know that there is indeed much to be joyful about, much to rejoice over, so that we would know that we are not alone in this world, that Christ is by our side in every dark and dreary place we travel, that God is here for us every day of our life when we are sorrowful and when we are joyful.

Today, we remember all those times, and we give thanks that we have made it this far, and that there is still more path for us to travel, that there is still two more weeks of Advent for us to prepare, and to traverse to that manger, to that babe, to that light of the world which will brighten our hearts and cause us to shout out “Gaudete! Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!”

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