

Dec 13,2020 advent 3

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

New Testament Lessons

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

* *Gospel Lesson*

John 1:6-8, 19-28

If we were still using Latin at Mass, the first word we would have heard in today's liturgy would have been "Gaudete", or "rejoice". On this third Sunday of Advent, we celebrate joy. The pink candle symbolizes joy in the midst of the darkness as we wait for the birth of the Savior.

The word is sprinkled throughout today's readings: in the first reading from Isaiah, the prophet proclaims that God has sent him to bring "glad tidings to the poor" and "I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul".

The second reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians begins with the words "Rejoice always".

These readings have their basis in the Hebrew language, which has more words for joy and rejoicing than any other language and this from a language known for having few words. In the Old Testament, 13 Hebrew roots, found in 27 different words, are used primarily for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship.

1) Hebrew religious ritual proclaims God as the source of joy.

2) In contrast to the rituals of other faiths of the East, Israelite worship was essentially a joyous proclamation and celebration.

3) The good Israelite regarded the act of thanking God as the supreme joy of his life.

4) As noted in our readings, pure joy is joy in God as both its source and object, like a circle: God gives joy to us and we return it back to God.

The Old Testament is a book of joy! The New Testament is a book of Good News! This is God's will for us to be joyful, to pray continuously and to give God thanks in all circumstances.

For adults, one of the things that make Christmas so joyful is seeing the wide-eyed expressions of wonder on little faces. Children know about joy. Somehow, we adults seem to lose that awe and wonder somewhere along the road.

Joy is not to be confused with happiness. The root of happiness is *hap*, meaning chance (as in happenstance or haphazard.)

Happiness depends on things going our way, whereas joy is always based on the knowledge of the presence of God-with-us, from the very beginning. Joy is something we can celebrate even when things are not going our way, even amid grief and sadness. As one pastor has written^[1], "The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room. "

While happiness is dependent on things going well in our lives, Joy is not dependent on outside forces. Happiness requires positive conditions: good health, right relationships, a good job, shelter, food, clothing. Joy, on the other hand, can be found even when these other conditions do not exist.

Frederick Buechner^[2] writes: "God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy. Whatever else it means to say that [we are created in God's

image,] I think it means that even when we cannot believe in [God,] even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt and deserted, God's mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood."

Covid has challenged us in many ways this year. Christmas is one more challenge. We want our traditions with family, friends, and church but it becomes more and more difficult to keep them. We are asked to limit family gatherings, wear masks as we shop, and conduct virtual worship. It seems like it could ruin Christmas for many. But Christmas joy is not about just carrying on traditions and having fun. It's about allowing God into our lives every minute of the day so that we can experience the joy he gives

Christmas can be a difficult time for many people. Perhaps you are one of those people who's not in the mood for Christmas and all of the celebrating this year. Like the Israelites in exile, you may feel like you are a person without a home, without much hope. You may be feeling alone and sorry for yourself. You may wonder how everyone around you can be so cheerful when you feel so down. Maybe you're grieving the loss of a family member who loved this time of year. Or maybe your family has caused you so much pain that you can't bear to join them for the holidays. Whatever the reason, if you find yourself unable to get into the Christmas spirit this year, this poem is for you:

Not celebrate?
 Your burden is too great to bear?
 Your loneliness is intensified during the season?
 Your tears seem to have no end?
 Not celebrate?
 You should lead the celebration!
 You should run through the streets
 to ring the bells and sing the loudest!
 You should fling the tinsel on the tree,

and open your house to your neighbors
 and call them in to dance!
 For it is you above all others
 who know the joy of Advent?
 It is unto you that a Savior is born this day.
 One who comes to lift your burden from your
 shoulders,
 One who comes to wipe the tears from your eyes.
 You are not alone,
 for he is born this day to you.
 Ann Weems, from *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

At this time of year, we need to let joy into our hearts. If your heart is aching this Advent season for any reason, if something stands in the way of joy, let it go.

One of the things which I have seen stand in the way of joy is people taking themselves or what they do too seriously. what we do is just a job or an appointed position, something that in the big picture is not worth getting upset about with another person and something which could be taken away in the twinkling of an eye.

Enjoy life, relish every moment, for we know not the day nor the hour. Consider doing something for shut-ins who have no one to care for them. Do something positive, something heart-warming, something that will bring someone else joy. For joy has a way of boomeranging and giving the person who gives it more joy than the one who receives it.

For those who experience life in the wilderness, for those who live a life of exile, there is good news of great joy. For unto us a child is born. And that child is named Emmanuel, which means God-With-Us. Amid even the darkest places, joy can be found in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is with us. If the message of Christmas is anything, it is that God chose to come

and be among us in human form, incarnate in the one called Jesus the Christ, the Prince of Peace, the Holy One, Emmanuel, God-With-Us.