

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2020 Yr B
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Traditionally, this Sunday is known as Gaudete Sunday, *gaudete* being Latin for rejoice. It marks the turning point of the season when we focus less on preparing ourselves to be worthy of the incarnate Christ, and rejoice more in the promise that he will be amongst us again. This kind of joy requires some intention on our part: we don't just receive joy; we have to cultivate it, to look for it, to practice it.

This is not happiness that we are trying to cultivate, it's joy and there is a difference between the two. One of the very obvious differences between happiness and joy is that happiness tends to be achieved externally, while joy is something achieved internally. For example, we can feel happy when we receive something like a gift or achieve something like awards or honors. These things are external or belong to the surface of our lives. It is not something deeper but, rather, superficial.

Joy, on the other hand, is something deeper. It is something we feel internally in our lives as human beings. For example, when we feel great joy when we worship God and when we feel great joy when we remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead. Joy has something to do with our inner nature rather than the outer nature of our human character. Jesus reminds us of this when he says to his disciples in the Gospel of John, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

Advent is a kind of like Lent, a season of preparation before a big time of celebration in our life together as Christians. We wait and watch together for the light of God to break into our darkness. Our Advent wreath candles grow brighter as the days of the year grow darker. The winter solstice, the day with the shortest period of daylight and the longest night of the year, will arrive on December 21, Thursday of the week ahead. Advent, and especially Gaudete Sunday, points us to a reason for rejoicing even when what's going on in our world might feel dark and leave us doubting if joy is even an option anymore.

Even as we start to fill our homes with lights, gifts and family and the smell of delicious food of the season, you might be facing the effects of grief, loss, or depression. Indeed others may find themselves without any lights, gifts or family this year. It might seem like the rest of the world is passing you by or leaving you behind – even the church. Seeing all the beautiful decorations, remembering hymns of hope and talking about hope, you might feel like you have to put on a happy face for the sake of those around you. You don't. Grief, loss, and depression are real, human conditions. People experience them every day. God's people experience them, too.

We feel grief and loss because of the brokenness of our world. I don't know a person that hasn't been touched by grief or loss this year, so Gaudete Sunday comes in this penitential period of Advent to remind us that Joy and is the counterpart to Loss.

Take a look at our Psalm for today.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
* then were we like those who dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
* and our tongue with shouts of joy.
Then they said among the nations,
* "The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us,
* and we are glad indeed.
Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
* will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

Take another look (or listen) to one of the best-known hymns of Advent, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It's all about crying out for God to bring His promised deliverance from a really bad, broken world!

We will taste joy, even in the face of grief, loss, or depression. That is the hope that comes from God's promised deliverer. It's the hope that we have looking to Jesus' cross and the waters of Baptism as visible signs of God's love for us. God asks us to turn towards him and see how God in Christ declares liberty for the captives and the opening of the prison for those who are bound by loss and grief, or trouble and depression. Look to the baptismal font and see how God in Christ binds up the brokenhearted and brings good news to the poor by delivering them into the comfort of His kingdom. God's love for us in the gift of Jesus is the reason why we are not helpless, why we are not hopeless. And that hopefulness can create a stillness full of joy within ourselves.

Gaudete! "Rejoice!" We have a deliverer, Jesus who comes to see us through the brokenness of this world. That's what you and I can rejoice on this Third Sunday in Advent. It's why the Apostle Paul can encourage us today to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." ([1 Thess. 5:16-18](#)) Note that it's not "give thanks *because of* all circumstances." You don't have to celebrate the brokenness of the world! Rather, we rejoice, celebrate, and give thanks because God is faithful to His promises and sends light into our darkness.

As the Body of Christ we live together as a community of care and compassion, sharing the hope that we have in the One who comes to deliver us. We can acknowledge that we are

broken people in a broken world who need hope that comes from outside of ourselves and creates peaceful joy within us. Isn't that why we call ourselves a community in the first place? Support and encourage each other, pray for one another and do good to each other. Comfort those who mourn, or who need your encouragement to find hope and joy.

In these darkest hours of the darkest days of the year, we sing to ourselves and in our hearts! We wait for the words of the Angel who appears to the shepherds and reminds us:

"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!" Gaudete! Amen.