

Sunday 16th December, 2018
The Third Sunday of Advent - Year C

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Psalm - Song of Isaiah
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Even taking into account the somewhat caustic and somber words of John the Baptist today, there is an overwhelming sense of hope and optimism pervading all of our readings today. And that's not altogether surprising, really. You see today is a special Sunday in this season. You know it, of course, because we lit a particular candle today - the pink one, nestled in amongst the 3 purple ones. Standing as something of a beacon to us.

This candle, this Sunday, signifies to us that we have reached the 3rd Sunday of Advent, and again we celebrate Gaudete Sunday - Gaudete meaning "joy".

And so, the Prophet Zephaniah proclaims "Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem." And Isaiah, in the Psalm, promises "With joy you will draw water: from the wells of salvation." And as if that were not enough, St. Paul writes to the early church in Philippi and simply says "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!"

Which makes we wonder - what is the source of the joy experienced and proclaimed by these 3 characters in our readings? This, too, is made clear for us. Their joy is for no other reason than this: God has done something. God has done something. For Zephaniah, the joy comes from God having taken away the sin of God's people and released them. Isaiah promises joy because God is the strength of the people, and Paul triumphantly promises "God is near" - and so the people rejoice.

Beautiful images of hope, of expectation and, ultimately, of joy. Joy in what the Lord, our saviour has done or will do.

But... Hasn't the last year been a particularly challenging one for us to really see the joy around us? Don't the events which saturate our airwaves, and dominate our conversations seem to really suck the joy right out of our lives - or at least threaten to? So the question for us remains the same as for the Prophets and for the Apostle. What is our source for joy? And the answer? The same as it was for them. Joy over what our God, our Saviour has done and will do.

This third Sunday of Advent brings us to something of a turning point in the season. It's a reminder to us to continue to raise our heads, to remember from whence our help comes, and yes, to listen intently and seriously to the words of repentance preached by John; to turn from that which separates us from God, and feast on a healthy dose of hope and joy.

“Rejoice in the Lord, always”. One of the inherent dangers in hearing these words, of course, is that we might think rejoicing is a matter of will. We must work at it, even fake it if necessary. This might well result in the façade of Christian cheerfulness which denies pain, and even judges others for being “weak” if they suffer. But true rejoicing doesn't come from pursuing joy; it comes from being *open* to joy. It's like, as one writer I found this week so beautifully put it, “being in a field full of butterflies. You don't actually know if one will land on your finger, but the chances are much greater if you'll stop chasing them around.”

I believe this is the message which joy sends us. It can break through at any moment to inspire us, refresh us, make us smile. It will break into the middle of even our darkest moments, but only if we're able to receive it.

If we've decided that joy isn't possible - because this moment is so terrible, because we feel too tragic, because it would be wrong to smile, because the world has depressed us beyond measure - then we shut ourselves to the possibility of joy. And joy then has no place to land.

So there, I believe, is the tension of today. The tension of Gaudete Sunday - we seek joy, we long for joy, we rejoice in what God has done, and continues to do in our lives, in the lives of others, and in the world. And yet we struggle with the singular lack of joy that we might witness around us and, at times, within us. And this is a tension that can threaten to bring us down.

So maybe it's time for a bit more honesty about all of this. Words that are honest about the expectancy of joy and the grief that results when joy is not found. Honesty that acknowledges what it is that we expect and why sometimes this just cannot end up coming to fruition because it's not grounded in any kind of perceivable or conceivable reality. And we need to be honest about the feelings of dashed hopes, grounded or not, when expectations of joy continue to go unfulfilled.

Because here is the reality this week -- we see, through the eyes of Luke and the words of John the Baptist, the potential and possibility of what the kingdom of God is and can be... and yet it seems so far away.

Yet, on the other hand, here is the theological promise this week, captured in our first three readings -- that people *are* able to give witness to God's truth in the face of the systems that try to suppress their truth; that those who believe in the world-changing gospel according to Jesus are able to testify to this gospel even in the face of resistance; that along with many other exhortations, the good news will be preached (Luke 3:18); that our human expectations are not God's. And God's expectations, unlike ours, are founded on and grounded in God's met promises.

So maybe it's time to be a bit more honest about all of this. Clearly, John understood something hard and flinty about joy. Joy is not sentiment. Joy is not happiness. Joy will cost you. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," John told the crowds who flocked to him in the Judean wilderness. Bear fruit — as in “bring it forth”. But also, bear it — as in “carry it, shoulder it, endure it”.

We are called, in our lives of faith, to be hopeful for what God will do. We are called to be thankful for what God has done. And we are called to seek joy.

There may and will be pain and darkness, but this I know for certain - the one who promises is faithful. God knows you. God sees you. God will gather you. And so I say to you - "Gaudete."

In the name of God. Amen