

3 Advent 2021

Holy God, true joy will never be found in tinsel and colored lights and even less in the excesses of this season. True joy is found in you and in you alone. Thank you for the gift of Joy Incarnate. Thank you for the Spirit who manifests your joy in our hearts all year long. Come, Lord Jesus. Bring us the gift of your joy and your life. Amen.

Most of you already know this, but it bears repeating. Prayer, Penitence, and Preparation, make up the tripod of Advent as well as Lent. Traditionally, this is marked by the color purple. However, some Protestant denominations started using blue to differentiate Advent from Lent, primarily because of the hopeful focus of Advent versus the somber penitential focus of Lent. But as we also know, we throw in a rose candle on the third Sunday of Advent.

We call today, Gaudete Sunday. This name comes from the first line of the opening prayer for the third Sunday in Advent, which encourages us to "rejoice in the Lord always." Although Advent does usher in a time of prayer, penance and spiritual preparation, Gaudete Sunday introduces the theme of joy as we anticipate to coming of Jesus both in the manger and at the Second coming.

When you think about it, it is not surprising that we have this particular gospel reading today. In a true spirit of hope and joy, John utters these famous words, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We

have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 9Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Joy? I guess you had to be there.

John the Baptist like his predecessor Elijah and the other prophets, was cut from a different cloth. He had no difficulty telling it like it is. He was not worried about being liked and one would think that people would have stayed away at all costs. But the opposite was true, to the point that even the Pharisees came down to watch and probably baptized by John.

It is a message we all need to hear today. It seems harder and harder to find joy. I am not talking about happiness because that can be pretty subjective.

Meg Bucher is a freelance writer and blogger at Sunny&80, is the author of "Friends with Everyone, Friendship within the Love of Christ." She writes;

"The difference between joy and happiness is substantial. We often assume that the fleeting feeling of happiness, giddy laughter and contentment in the comforts of life is akin to the joy we experience in Jesus. But joy supernaturally sustains our souls in seasons of heartache, injustice, and sorrow. Enduring the valleys of life is nearly impossible without the life-giving fuel of joy in Christ."

People find happiness in all sorts of diverse ways that have nothing to do with Jesus. This is strictly my opinion, and I do not want to go into too much depth here, but I wonder who John might direct his comments to in society today? I admit that there are times when I have little difficulty imagining John addressing Congress, as 'You Brood of Vipers'! It is tragic that school board members are threatened with bodily harm for trying to enforce mask mandates for students. Flights being redirected due to passengers assaulting flight attendants and fights breaking out between passengers. Coffee thrown at baristas or food tossed at Food service workers. Or this message that was left for a republican congressman who voted for the infrastructure bill; "I hope you die. I hope your family dies. I hope everybody on your staff dies. You (blank) piece of (blank). Traitor!" I am not judging what is in anyone's hearts but finding joy or happiness within society today is difficult.

There are always events taking place over which we have no control. If anyone doubts that true joy is only found in God, just ask those who live in Mayfield, KY; Monette, Arkansas; and Edwardsville, Illinois; where the death toll is expected to top 100 and so many more who have been injured by tornadoes that ripped through towns and homes, late Friday night and early yesterday morning.

"Graves County, Kentucky, Commissioner Todd Hayden told CNN's Pamela Brown that he arrived at the candle factory in the dark to find "nothing but a pile of rubble."

"You wondered how anybody could still be alive in there. Knowing there were a lot of people in that place, a bunch of us went over and started trying to uncover what might be there," Hayden said.

"Seeing people come out of that pile of rubble alive was just amazing," he said.

"We would send in sawzalls and cutting tools to cut wires and bars and then all of a sudden they would come up out of a hole."

Hayden said they probably rescued 10-12 people from the part of the debris where he was, some injured and many stunned and in shock.

"Some of them would come out crying. They'd see their husband or their father or whatever and they would immediately go to their arms and just fall in them. Other people -- one lady came out she was kind of dancing, she was so happy to be out of there."

People were working at the factory as it has been "going 24/7" in part to meet Christmastime candle demand, US Rep. James Comer, who represents the area, told CNN."

The recovery work is only just beginning and will continue well into the new year. How can anyone find joy in the midst of so much devastation and loss?

Difficult? Yes, but not impossible.

Despite John's harsh words to the people, they still ask the right question.

““What then should we do?” And John gives them practical advice. Advice that we can follow.

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages." Straight and to the point. But before we begin to relax too much, John goes right back to his stern message as it relates to the One who is to follow. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Still not the joyful message we may be looking for this morning. Maybe the words of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry might help.

“Advent is, of course, a season of hopeful expectation, pressing on toward the promise. It could very well be said that all of life is about hopeful expectation, pressing on toward the promise despite the long, hard journey we face.

Indeed, throughout the biblical narrative and the church’s history, we encounter faithful people hanging on to hope, sometimes by a slender thread, clinging to a promise far removed from their harsh reality.

Some caught a glimpse of something glorious as they struggled on. As Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed before he was slain, “I have seen the promised land.” Like Moses before him and far too many others through the ages, Dr. King did not witness the full realization of that promise. But he caught a glimpse, and in his life, he shared a dream of justice and equality and opportunity for God’s children...for ALL God’s children. He held fast to hope, refusing to waver, and he urged others to do the same. “He continues; “At times, it is difficult to still see the promise through the fog that envelops us, the storm that bears down on us. Life can be so very hard and the forces of darkness so overpowering that we might understandably be tempted to give up, to let go of the hope, to let go of the dream. Yet, as the psalmist notes, even in “the valley of the shadow of death,” we are not alone; the Shepherd is with us. We make our song, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” precisely because we dare to believe in Emmanuel, God with us. And if God is indeed with us,

God is with ALL of us. The promise endures. The hope—the dream—remains sure...despite the fog and storm, despite the darkness.” End quote.

We desperately need this time of Advent to prepare, to pray, to seek penitence, and to find the joy that only Christ brings to us, especially in times of despair, of trials, of sadness, of struggle, of anxiety, and fear. Despite all of this, John’s message to us remains the same.

Abiding in Jesus, we can walk in the light and provide coats to the homeless who are shivering in the cold of winter. We can offer food to neighborhood children who live in homes with empty refrigerators. We can behave ethically in our businesses, charging no more than what is right and fair. And we can turn to Jesus for help when we need guidance in caring for people and showing sacrificial love.

The world will never make this easy. And it gets harder all the time. But as Paul reminds us; “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

There is immense joy in this.

Amen

