



Bible Study

Third Sunday in Advent Year C

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Augustine and St. Peter Claver
Parishes
New Orleans, La.
December 16, 2018
Volume 3, Issue 3

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near.” Phil. 4:4-5

Reading I: Zephaniah 3:14-18a

LORD WE WAIT ON YOUR JOY! Joy can be defined as a pleasant emotion or delight. The Encarta English Dictionary of North America defines happiness as a feeling or showing of pleasure, contentment or joy. The Bible describes many forms of joy, including gladness, contentment, and cheerfulness. The joy of Christians rises above earthly circumstance and reflects the character of God. The joy of a righteous person (Ps. 150; Phil 4:4) is produced by the Spirit of God. It looks beyond our present circumstance to our future salvation (Rom. 5:2). This kind of joy is not mere happiness. Joy like this is even possible during sorrow. It is the joy that comes from loving others like God loves us. It is this joy that we seek and await during this Season of Advent.

The first reading points to God’s love and



mercy to Israel as their source of joy. Zephaniah told the people of God to rejoice, because the Lord their God was in their midst and their days of mourning were over (vv. 14-15). God Himself rejoiced over their deliverance through His mercy. His celebration was motivated by love.

Zephaniah, the prophet, preached to the people of Judah and Jerusalem around 625 B.C. They had abandoned the Law of Moses for pagan gods. After chastising them (vv. 1-13), Zephaniah gave them hope and consolation (v. 13). In a sense, Zephaniah was the face of the merciful love of God. He affirmed that God loved them enough to forgive their sins and was once again among them. (vv. 14-17) The joy that Zephaniah and the Jews felt was the joy that comes from knowing that the sovereign God loved them and worked all things for their ultimate good. He reminded them that the source of their joy is not in idols and worldly pleasures, but in God’s physical presence among them through His love and justice. God Himself was happy to give His love to them as He sang over their repentance (v. 17). The mercy of God was the source of their joy. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: What makes you joyful? What does obedience have to do with your happiness?

Zephaniah

Zephaniah was an Old Testament prophet and the author of the Book of Zephaniah (Zeph 1:1). As God’s spokesman to the southern kingdom of Judah, Zephaniah began his ministry about 627 B.C., the same year as the great prophet Jeremiah. Zephaniah was a member of the royal house of Judah, since he traced his ancestry back to King Hezekiah. He prophesied during the reign of King Josiah (ruled 641 B.C. - 609 B.C.). One theme of his message was that through His judgment God would preserve a remnant, a small group of people who would continue to serve as His faithful servants in the world (Zeph 3:8-13). (From Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

Reading II: Philippians 4:4-7

LORD WE WAIT ON YOUR JOY! The kind of joy that St. Paul expressed in these verses is a joy that was produced by the Spirit of God. It was joy beyond his personal circumstance. This reading from Philippians was written by St. Paul while he was in prison to a community experiencing opposition to Christian beliefs. The word “joy” appears sixteen times in this short letter. The source St. Paul’s joy is not his release from prison. God’s loving mercy was the source of his joy. Perhaps that is why he said, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” (v. 4) Like Zephaniah, he encouraged the Philippians to imitate him as he focused on his source of joy, the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. While imprisoned, St. Paul focused on the purpose of his life and to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His ministry to the Philippians might be viewed as fulfilling the prophecy of Zephaniah, in that in despite his imprisonment, the Lord, his God was with him. His words brought the peace of Christ into the community at Philippi. For St. Paul, joy is defined as trusting in God, that his state of confinement would be used for God’s purpose. The source of St. Paul’s joy is God’s love and mercy that he experienced through prayer, petition and thanksgiving (vv. 6-7). It is that joy that brings a peace that calms anxiety and guards our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ. (v. 7) Lord we wait on your joy. DISCUSSION QUESTION: Do you rejoice in the Lord during times of turmoil and trouble?

Gospel: Luke 3:10-18

LORD WE WAIT ON YOUR JOY! *An old Moravian Prayer reads: Father, through your Son we have learned that grace is when you give us what we don't deserve; mercy is when you don't give us what we do deserve.* We tend to find joy in the things that make us feel good, because we think we deserve to be happy. Watching shoppers in line happily paying lots of money for new electronic gadgets captures the secular world view of happiness. The phrase, "I got what I want," sums up the attitude. In contrast, the proper response of the Christian to the world of commercialism is; "I got what He provides." For the Christian, happiness is a life of giving and not receiving and showing the world that a merciful God provides for our every need. Lord we wait for your joy.

After a scathing description of those who sought baptism (v. 7), John required that those seeking the mercy of God have a change of heart. His preaching had caused a commotion all over Palestine. Some thought that he was a prophet. By the time John began his ministry, there had been no prophet from God in over 200 years. Some thought he was the expected Messiah. John prepares the way for the Messiah by instructing those who sought true joy to change their ways. Through his spiritual works of mercy, that is, instructing those who sought the Messiah, he calls on everyone to perform corporal works of mercy and imitate the merciful God in their midst. In a sense, he proclaimed that joy is repentance and turning to God.

They rushed to him for what else, *happiness*. They asked, "What should I do?" (v. 10) John gave clear and direct answers to the question. He pointed them to a joy and peace that was beyond their understanding. He told the crowd to love others, as they love themselves (v. 10). To the tax collectors who extorted their fellow Jews, he told them in effect – you want joy, stop stealing. To the Jewish soldiers who oppressed their countrymen on behalf of Roman authority, he said; do not steal and do not abuse your power. He told them to be the face of the God of loving mercy. For John the Baptist, the key to joy was God's mercy and obedience to His Word. Note that John did not tell anyone to quit their occupation. He told them to use their occupations as a way to serve God by showing mercy. There is joy in any occupation that serves God and serves others.

John's message went beyond prescribing expected behavior, as exemplified by the ritual of baptism (v. 16). His message was one word, "Jesus"; the Word of God, the Mighty Savior, in their midst. The presence of Jesus is God's love by the power of the Holy Spirit, who rejoices at our return to Him. He is the source of our Joy. The image of the "winnowing fan" (Isa. 21:20), that separates the wheat from the chaff is a symbol of God's mercy applied to those who return and those who do not. The love of God is the source of their joy. **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What joy do you experience in serving others?

Pray About It!

Monday

Read Zephaniah 3:14-18a. Speak words of encouragement and joy today.

Tuesday

Read Gospel: Luke 3:10-18. Spend fifteen minutes in silent prayer.

Wednesday

Donate to a shelter for battered women. Read Philippians 4:4-7. Visit and bring a gift for someone who is ill or shut in.

Thursday

Read Luke 3: 10. What will you give away?

Friday

Attend mass and receive the Eucharist.

Below are excerpts from Evangelii Gaudium, Joy of the Gospel, that underpin the challenge—and the joy—the Holy Father has laid before us.

37. Works of love directed to one's neighbor are the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit....

48. We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them.

53. Just as the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.

How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality.

54. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own.

Resources: Philippians, Ivan Havener, O.S.B. The Collegeville Bible Commentary, New Testament The Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minn. pp 1161-1163; Luke - Jerome Kodell, O.S.B. The Collegeville Bible Commentary, New Testament, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville Minn. pp 94-945; The Sunday Readings Cycle C Kevin O'Sullivan, O. F. M. Franciscan Press, Quincy University, Quincy, Ill. pp. 12-16 ; Mercy, homiletics.com /subscriber/illustrations_ ; Zephaniah - from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers.

This meditation is prepared by Deacon Terrel J. Broussard for personal use in Adult Faith Formation at St. Maria Goretti, St. Augustine, Blessed Sacrament / St. Joan of Arc and St. Peter Claver Parishes in New Orleans, La. ©2018