

3rd Sunday of Advent [B] 2023

(MBS, OSF)

The Third Sunday of Advent has traditionally been called Gaudete Sunday—“gaudete” being the Latin word for “rejoice.” It is not simply because the season is more than half over and we are that much closer to Christmas, but it is about the scriptures in today’s liturgy, each one obviously about joy.

Today’s OT passage from the end chapters of the Book of Isaiah, was actually written long after Isaiah’s time. The author writing in Isaiah’s name, is speaking to the people of his own day, a people who had been exiles and slaves in Babylon for 50 years. But he was telling them that it was over. They had been set free by the king of Persia, God’s instrument, who had conquered Babylon. They could go home—go home to rebuild their cities and farms and their Temple.

The people, for the most part, were glad to be set free, but it wasn’t an easy time for them. After 50 years they were pretty well settled in Babylon. They had jobs and homes there. Their homes in Israel had been leveled 50 years earlier and there wasn’t much to go back to. Nothing was left of their beloved Temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed, except a hill covered with rocks and weeds. The prophet had a real challenge, encouraging God’s people to rejoice about going home. But he was telling them to look beyond all that destruction and rejoice in what God was doing for them.

The response to the first reading, which is almost always from the Book of Psalms, is today taken from the gospel of Luke. It is Mary’s hymn of joy, called the Magnificat, which she enthusiastically proclaimed when she visited her cousin Elizabeth after the Annunciation. If there was anyone who ever had good reason to be anxious and depressed, it was Mary. Here she was, suddenly going to be a mother. Her husband-to-be Joseph was

about to break off the engagement. In just a few months she would be disgraced among her family and friends when it became obvious that she was going to have a child without being married. In that society, she would have no way to support herself financially without a husband. And yet we hear, as she visits her cousin Elizabeth, how she **rejoices**, not in her misery, but in what God was about to do.

And then we come to Paul. As we know from his letters, his job as a missionary was not an easy one. He tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians that he was beaten numerous times, put into jail, faced angry mobs, had gone without eating or sleeping, been shipwrecked three times, suffered from cold and pain, and faced danger from robbers, his own people, and even supposed Christians. Outside of that, he was in good shape!

Yet he writes (from prison) to the Thessalonians: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks!” Why? “Because,” he says, “this is the will of God for you.” If it is God’s will that we be joyful, he will certainly help us if we choose that path. Paul is saying that we can choose to sit around and feel sorry for ourselves or we can choose to be joyful even in difficult times. We can let self-pity control our lives, or we can choose, through faith and with God’s help, to rejoice. If we can believe in the great things God has done and is about to do for us, we have every reason to rejoice.

Are you seeing a pattern here? Isaiah, Mary, Paul—each of them, in spite of enormous problems and challenges in their lives, were suffused with joy, because they could see and believe in what **God was doing for them.**

In the year 2023, things aren’t as bad as they were in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, although people living there now, may see it every bit as bad as it was 2500 years ago. But in spite of the fractured and divided nature of our country these days,

we have food and clothing and shelter, and we don't worry about when the next falling bomb will destroy everything we own or everyone we love. We complain about gasoline prices which are actually the cheapest of almost any developed country in the world. We whine about paying taxes, but of the 40 largest economies in the world Americans rank almost last (36th of 40) in the percentage of taxes we pay to the government.

And even though we can be anxious and upset about many things, as Jesus would famously say to his friend Martha, **we still have more reasons to rejoice than any people who ever lived on this planet.** In this country we enjoy wonderful physical resources, brilliant medical and scientific minds, thousands of dedicated first responders, nurses, doctors and hospital staff often risking their lives for people they do not know. And we have freedom.

During the pandemic, many people loudly claimed that our freedoms were being taken away. But perhaps COVID actually forced us to honestly look at what freedom truly is— not my choice to do whatever I want, whenever and wherever I want—but my opportunity to use my God-given talents—wherever and whenever God calls me—to build his Kingdom in this fragile world. If that means curtailing some things which I enjoy and to which I have become accustomed, for the safety and benefit of others, so be it. We do not live for ourselves, but for God and for God's people. True joy in our hearts, must go much deeper than all the *things* we have around us. Like Mary, we too must *rejoice in what God is doing in our lives*. God's plans for us are magnificent, his life and his love so wonderful that we can't begin to take it in. We can only rejoice.

I would like to close with one more voice about joy. It is the voice of our beloved Holy Father, Pope Francis, who almost always seems to have a smile on his face, in spite of the physical

pain he lives with every day. The first document he wrote after his election as the successor to Peter was *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, a wonderful, hope-filled testament. Shortly after writing that, he met with a group of seminarians in Rome and he told them that they must be men of joy, or he didn't want them to be ordained; he didn't want them to be priests in his church, if they could not radiate the joy of the Gospel to those they would serve!

And then he writes this: "Dear friends, if we walk in hope, allowing ourselves to be surprised by the new wine that Jesus offers us, we will have a true joy in our hearts, and we cannot fail to be witnesses of this joy. Christians are joyful; they are never gloomy. God is at our side. Jesus has shown us that the face of God is that of a loving Father. Sin and death have been defeated. *Christians cannot be pessimists*. They do not look like someone in constant mourning. If we truly are in love with Jesus and if we sense how much he loves us, our hearts will *light up* with a joy that spreads to everyone around us." [Homily, 24 July 2013]

Gaudete! Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always!