

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

Every year when we light the rose candle on the Advent wreath there are questions about why this one candle is pink, and why we light it today on the third Sunday of Advent. It almost seems like it would be more appropriately lit on the fourth Sunday of Advent, when we hear the story of Mary. Of course there's an explanation, as there is with every one of our ancient traditions, and this one actually goes back to the time before Henry the Eighth and his "little" disagreement with Rome that resulted in the formation of the Church of England, to which we Episcopalians and Anglicans all over the world can trace our roots.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the Latin mass on the third Sunday of Advent opens with the word "Gaudete," which means "rejoice." "Rejoice in the Lord always," the mass begins, using the fourth verse of the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Back in those olden days, the celebration of the Eucharist truly was a mystery. There was no electricity, so the church, which was likely made of stone, as ours is, would have been dark, lit with candles. The Latin language was known by only a few, so the great majority of people who heard it had no idea what was being said. Something called a "ruud screen" hid much of what the priest did from the congregation. His motions that *could* be seen and sounds like our sanctus bells and occasional familiar words became symbols to the congregation that let them know when and how to respond. Advent was also observed much more strictly in those days, bearing more resemblance to the penitential tone of Lent than it does now. The rose candle became a reminder for them that they had passed the mid-point of the season and would soon be able to celebrate the birth of the Christ child with great joy and thanksgiving.

Times have changed so very much! For the most part, we leave the symbolism of Advent inside the walls of the church. It would be difficult for us to be saturated with the secular celebration of Christmas and hold back from it completely. I know that many of you think I'm an Advent Grinch, and in some ways that's true. But I am confessing to you today that I have cheated on Advent. I did so this weekend, and on more than one occasion, and in those situations I found joy. Joy is our theme on this third Sunday of Advent, and I invite you now to take just a minute to think about where you have found joy in the past few weeks.

Where were you, and who were you with?

What did it feel like?

Was your response emotional?

Did it involve laughter? Or tears?

Did you share it with someone, or did you let it pass away, almost unnoticed?

Joy is a feeling of great happiness, and "rejoice," which has joy at its center, means to feel or show that you are very happy about something. In my own experience, joy is an emotional response to something that touches us deeply. Joy requires us to feel. While we can think we know joy, we must feel it in order for it to be real. Sometimes it's fleeting, a passing moment of deep gladness, sometimes it can be long lasting. But most of us are a bit skeptical about someone who is joyful all the time. There's something in it that we are simply unable to trust. And that's likely because we may not have experienced a deep, long-lasting joy ourselves.

Scholars believe that First Thessalonians is the earliest Christian writing we have. It's believed to have been written early in Paul's apostolic career, which means, of course, that it was written not long after Jesus' death and resurrection. The folks in Thessalonica were perplexed. They could not understand why Jesus Christ had not yet returned in glory. Today's reading is an excerpt from a larger passage in which Paul shows them how they are to live while they're waiting for the second coming of Christ. First he speaks with them about how to treat their leaders. Next he speaks about how they are to treat each other and those who are outside of their church community. Then, in today's passage he addresses their worship, with three admonitions. "Rejoice always," he says in the first. "Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." Can you imagine what our world would be like if we rejoiced all the time? If we prayed without ceasing? If we found opportunity for thanksgiving even in the most dire circumstances?

Paul's second admonition to the Thessalonians is found in verse 19, which says, simply, "Do not quench the Spirit." Allow room for the Spirit to work in your life. I believe this is especially true and important for us today, as individuals and as a church. We live in a world of rules and regulations, and here at St. Francis we have guidelines for everything we do in community. To some degree that is helpful, but in both our personal lives and in our church life together, we must make room for the Spirit to speak to us, to sometimes nudge us in directions that are risky or frightening, and then allow God's Spirit to guide us as we undertake whatever has been shown to us.

The third admonition is one you sometimes hear me use in the blessing at the end of our service, but in this case pertain to prophetic words: "test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." St. Paul is telling us to listen carefully and watch closely and with God's guidance to seek good and send evil away.

It's as if Paul has found the formula for joy: constant prayer and thanksgiving, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide our lives, listening closely to what we hear and analyzing what we see, so that through God's grace we will know what is good and what is evil. If he were writing in the twenty-first century, he would probably say that it's all about attitude. If we cannot find joy in the current context of our lives, how can we find joy—and its partner, hope—in the expectation of what's to come, specifically in the expectation that Christ *will* come again. If we cannot find joy in our lives of faith and in what we believe to be true and holy, maybe it's time for a change in our perspective.

My preaching professor often cautioned his students that we should not give feelings to the folks in the Bible unless those feelings are already stated, which rarely happens because the Bible is a straightforward account of the story of God's people and there is very little emotion in it. Yet I cannot read stories about these folks without wondering how they felt about the things that happened to them, and so I'm throwing Dr. BroSEND's caution to the wind as I wonder about Zechariah and Elizabeth, the aging parents of John the Baptist. In Luke's account of John's birth, we're told that the angel appeared to Zechariah and told him his wife Elizabeth would bear a son—despite the fact that both of them were old. Luke tells us that when Elizabeth's "neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her...they rejoiced with her." That was not the case with Zechariah, who couldn't believe what Gabriel told him and was stricken dumb because of his disbelief. Yet once his voice was restored, he called his son "the prophet of the Most High," and prophesied that John would go before the Lord to tell people about him, to prepare them for what they would see and hear and learn from Jesus. Perhaps Zechariah can be an example for us in this season of Advent, not only about what happens when we "quench the Spirit," but also about how our lives can be changed when we embrace joy.

Seek joy. Rejoice always. And remember the promise of St. Paul, in his words to the Thessalonians: "May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this." *Amen.*