

“Rejoice – Always?”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice”

REJOICE!

For many years, the third Sunday in Advent had been a solemn day of remembrance at St. John’s Church. Even though the faithful departed had been remembered the previous month on All Saints Day, the congregation took this time to remember all who had died and to offer comfort for those whose mourning made it difficult for them to join in the celebrations of Christmas. A highlight of the worship service was a moment of silence, when the only sound that usually could be heard was the whirring of the organ fan. But one person in the congregation hadn’t gotten the notice about this moment of silence; little Bobby was always known as a boisterous, outgoing little boy who spoke loudly and frequently. His parents never knew what would come out of his mouth, or when he might speak up at the most unexpected and inappropriate occasions. So it didn’t come as a surprise to them or to anyone in the congregation when right in the middle of the solemn moment of silence Bobby shouted out “Rejoice!” This break in the silence startled everyone in the congregation, but soon the silence returned as people refocused on remember loved ones who were gone from their sight. But just when the memory of that loud interruption had faded from most people’s minds, Bobby shouted out again, “Rejoice!” At this point, his mortified parents took him out of the sanctuary in the narthex and asked him to explain himself. With a voice filled with absolute sincerity, Bobby explained his outbursts: “Our Sunday school lesson last week told us that we should ‘rejoice in the Lord always, and to say it again!’”

REJOICE!

Even though Bobby’s parents were upset over the occasion he chose to shout “rejoice,” they couldn’t argue with his reasoning. Indeed, what Bobby had learned in Sunday school is the word that is proclaimed to us on this Sunday in both the words of the prophet Zephaniah and the apostle Paul:

- “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” – Zephaniah 3:14
- “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” – Philippians 4:4.

The biblical command to “rejoice” is so central to the message of God’s Word on this third Sunday in Advent that it is traditionally named “Gaudete Sunday,” from the Latin for “rejoice.” It originated in the days when the season of Advent was a fast of forty days in preparation for Christmas (modeled after the Lenten fast in preparation for Easter). Midway through this penitential season, Gaudete Sunday offered worshippers a break from the solemnity of the season; flowers and organ music were once again permitted and rose-coloured vestments replaced the somber purple or black seasonal colours. It was a Sunday in which the penitential exercises of Advent were suspended so that people could sing out “*Gaudete in Domino semper*” (“rejoice in the Lord always”) as they looked forward to the promised redemption that was coming in the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

REJOICE!

Rejoicing is the keynote of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, written to a Christian community in Macedonia for which Paul has great affection. It is a letter of encouragement for these faithful yet persecuted

Christians to *“keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”* (4:9). The apostle encourages the Philippian Christians to be imitators of Christ’s humility, being *“of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind ... Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.”* (2:2, 4). Paul writes to this community of the faithful in full confidence that *“the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”* (1:6). Paul’s message in this letter is that *“there is joy in knowing Christ and his resurrection, which provides Paul and the Philippians with a new perspective on life and enables them to rejoice, even in difficult circumstances.”* (Lutheran Study Bible).

The two-fold expression to “rejoice” in today’s Second Lesson echoes what the Apostle said in 3:1: *“Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.”* Such rejoicing is not only appropriate on certain occasions; Christians are to rejoice “always, at all times.” Rejoicing for Christians is to be an ongoing activity, one that is not based on the particular circumstances of the Philippian Christians. *“The idea then is to keep on rejoicing in the Lord at all times, regardless of what may come upon you.”* (Michael Joseph Brown).

It is important to note that Paul writes these words from prison (*“it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ”* – 1:13); Paul has experienced tremendous hardship in his apostolic ministry, so his exhortation to “rejoice” are not the words of someone who has lived a charmed existence but a person who knows that rejoicing may be the furthest thing from one’s mind. The reason Paul can encourage others to rejoice is that his rejoicing is “in the Lord.” Because Paul has experienced God’s presence even in the most difficult of circumstances, he has experienced the importance of continuous rejoicing in the Lord. Luke reports that Paul and Silas, although beaten and in prison, *“were praying and singing hymns to God”* (Acts 16:25), so that even their jailer and *“his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.”* (16:34). Continuous rejoicing is a theme that Paul repeats throughout his letters:

- *“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”* – Romans 12:12.
- *“For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”* – Romans 14:17.
- *“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* – Galatians 5:22-23.
- *“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”* – 2 Corinthians 6:8-10.

Those who Paul encourages to rejoice in the Lord at all times are also assured that *“the Lord is near.”* (4:5). Such “nearness” is the theme of Advent, in which Christians wait in hopeful expectation for the coming of the Lord (*“The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”* – Revelation 22:20). It can also mean that the Lord is “near” or “close at hand,” the confidence for God’s people that God’s steadfast love and eternal presence are with them always (*“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* – Lamentations 3:22-23). *“The Lord whose return is imminent is also continually near his people to guide them.”* (Brown).

The affirmation that the Lord is near leads Paul to encourage his readers to *“not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”* (4:6). Paul’s words of encouragement are rooted in Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, in which our Lord instructs his followers *“do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear ... But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (Matthew 6:25, 33). All prayer and supplication are to be accompanied

with thanksgiving, which has characterized the whole of this letter. The result will be that *“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (4:7).

- “Such joy is the fruit and the consequence of faith ... When such faith in God’s Word lives truly in our hearts, God becomes to us dear and sweet, for the heart now trusts fully and feels there is nothing but grace and favor with him, and dreads his punishment no longer. But it is filled with hope and confidence that God has given in Jesus Christ such surpassing grace.” – Martin Luther, Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, 1522.

REJOICE!

This command from Paul may feel as disconcerting and inappropriate as Bobby’s outburst during that moment of silence. To rejoice *“at all times and in all places”* may feel impossible and frankly offensive when we are mourning the loss of a loved one, or we have just lost our job, or our child is suffering from an opioid addiction, or we are estranged from our family and facing a Christmas by ourselves. But Paul’s example reminds us that as he found strength to rejoice in the knowledge that the Lord was always with him even in the midst of the challenges and difficulties he faced, we can also find voices that rejoice in the Lord because we too know that no matter what our life circumstances may be, we have the assurance that *“the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”* (Psalm 46:7).

- “God does not want people to be sad and ... hates sad thoughts and saying and doctrines that oppress us. God makes our hearts joyful. For he did not send his Son to make us sad but to make us glad. That is why the prophets and apostles and the Lord Christ himself admonish us and even command us at all times to be joyful and of good cheer ... Where there is this joy of the Spirit, there is a dear joy in the heart through faith in Christ, and we know of a certainty that he is our Saviour and high priest, and this joy is seen in the things we say and do.” – Luther.

REJOICE!

While this Sunday is one in which we hear our Lord’s call to rejoice, such rejoicing is not one that is only to be heeded on this one day, but a call for us to rejoice always. When the angel Gabriel visits Mary, he does not address the woman who will be the mother of Jesus with traditional Hebrew greeting *shalom* (“peace be with you”). Instead, Gabriel’s greeting is *chaire* – “rejoice!” – for not only has Mary *“found favour with God,”* but she will be the mother of the child who *“will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”* (Luke 1:26-38).

- “This exclamation from the angel – we could say – marks the true beginning of the New Testament ... ‘Rejoice’ – as we have seen – is in the first instance a Greek greeting, and to that extent this pronouncement by the angels immediately opens the door to the peoples of the world: the universality of the Christian message becomes evident ... Gabriel’s message to Mary takes up and brings into the present the prophecy of Zephaniah 3:14-17: ‘Rejoice, daughter of Zion, shout, Israel ... the king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.’” – Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI).

REJOICE!

Bobby’s outburst during the solemn silence of that Sunday of remembrance had at first been shocking and inappropriate; but during that week, many of the people who had been at worship that morning reflected upon it and realized that it was most appropriate. It didn’t remove the pain and sorrow many were experiencing due to the absence of loved ones at their Christmas gatherings, nor did it take away the

challenges and difficulties that they were encountering. But it gave them the assurance that they did not need to face these circumstances by themselves, not did they need to doubt or worry about what might happen in their future. As the prophet Isaiah had spoken, *“a little child shall lead them”* (Isaiah 11:6) – in this case, a very enthusiastic, boisterous child who took to heart what the Lord had taught him: at all times and in all circumstances, *“rejoice in the Lord always – again I will say, rejoice!”* Amen.