

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“Tis The Season... To Be Jolly”

Philippians 4:4-7

“Tis the season...to be jolly.” At least that’s what the song says. And yet, for many it’s not. It’s no coincidence that during this season of the year, the rates of depression and suicide go sky high. For many, expectations are unrealistically high and, in large part, go unfulfilled. The world sings of peace and good will and joy and yet we continue to see so much hatred and violence and trouble all around us. Pick up any newspaper, watch the news of TV, go on the internet – the world can indeed be a very depressing place. It’s filled with bad news. And personal problems can be accentuated during the holidays as well – loneliness, frustration, marital and family problems, unemployment and financial difficulties, drug and alcohol addiction abound. And if this isn’t enough, many rush around madly, trying to cram 48 hours of activity into every 24 hour day hoping that somehow they can have a “Merry Christmas.” “Tis the season to be jolly” and yet, are we really?

The third candle on our advent wreath has been lit today. And while the first two were blue – indicating the hope that is ours in this Advent season – the third candle is pink – a color that represents the joy that can be ours not only during this season but throughout the year. Our Scripture lessons for today, especially our Old Testament and Epistle lessons, call our attention to the place of joy in the life of God’s people. But where is this joy to be found?

Is it to be found in the world? It would seem not. Is it to be found in the trees and the lights or in the parties and the presents of the season? Not for long. Is it to be found within ourselves as if we just have to be more positive? No. For while these things may bring a measure of joy they don’t bring real and lasting joy – the kind of joy God wants for all people.

So where can real and lasting joy be found? Where else but, as the hymn writer says, “on holy ground.” The Bible tells us that joy – real joy, lasting joy, the kind of joy that not only the world but each one of us is desperate for and yet have so little of, is found in Jesus Christ.

Do you remember what the angel said to the shepherds on that first Christmas so long ago? “Don’t be afraid. I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it’s for everyone! The Savior, yes, the Messiah, the Lord, has been born tonight in Bethlehem!” And then after having seen the newborn Christ, the Bible says that the shepherds returned with joy as they told everyone what they had seen and heard.

In speaking to his disciples some 30 years later, Jesus himself said, “When you obey me you are living in my love, just as I obey the Father and live in his love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your cup of joy will overflow.” And then just before he was to be crucified he said, “The world will greatly rejoice over what is going to happen to me, and you will weep. But your weeping shall suddenly turn to wonderful joy. It will be the same joy as that of a woman when her child is born – her anguish gives place to rapturous joy and the pain is

forgotten. You have sorrow now, but I will see you again and then you will rejoice; and no one can rob you of that joy.” And then after Jesus died and was raised again, the Bible says that “the women ran from the tomb, badly frightened but also filled with joy, and rushed to find the disciples to give them the message.”

You see, to know Jesus Christ – to know him as your personal Lord and Savior – to know God as your loving Father and to know the Holy Spirit as your indwelling Comforter – to know, not just with your mind but to know with your heart and to live in that loving relationship day by day is, in the end, the only source of real and lasting joy. Thus, the Bible says, that this joy is the hallmark of the Christian life. It marked the life of the early Church in the book of Acts, it was and still is one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it continues to characterize the sacramental life of the faithful Christian even to this day.

You see, in the end, joy is not something we can achieve on our own – as if we only work hard enough we will have it. Rather it is a gift, a dynamic, living gift, that comes to us from God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But having said that, how come it’s so hard to be joyful sometimes even for us? Largely it’s due to the fact that as a gift it’s only ours for as long as we continue faithful. Like any other gift from God it can be overshadowed by sin, by anxiety and by worry, by neglect, by concentrating on the things of this world instead of the things of the world to come. That’s why St. Paul called upon the Christians in Thessalonica in today’s Epistle lesson to rejoice always, to rejoice by walking daily with God and by daily practicing the art of prayer and thanksgiving in all circumstances and by not quenching the Holy Spirit.

And that’s sound advice for us as well – especially at this time of the year. As we daily confess our sin and our need for Christ and go to God for forgiveness, we can continue to rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit. And because the Spirit is the downpayment of our salvation, God empowers us to know the deep down joy that comes with being saved in Christ and to know His forgiving and healing power in our lives, and, in the process, to experience the peace that passes all understanding, the peace of which the angels sang on that first Christmas so many years ago. Through the power of the Holy Spirit active in Word and Sacrament in your life and mine, we can and will know the joy that this world just can’t give.

An old adage says, “Keeping smiling and everyone will wonder what you know that they don’t.” And what is it that we know that the world doesn’t? Perhaps it’s the true meaning of Christmas – that it’s not bound up in the buying and selling, the hurrying here and the rushing there, the heartburn and the headaches. Perhaps it’s that real joy, lasting joy, is found only in Jesus Christ. And perhaps it’s that we know our salvation is secure in him and that we have a place in the Kingdom forever.

So “sing, O daughter of Zion, shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy.” During this Advent season, may our preparation not only be watchful and penitent but may it also be filled with joy – and not just for a season but forever! In Jesus’ name. Amen.