

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11
The Song of Mary
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
JOHN 1:6-8,19-28

JOY

Four of the traditional themes of Advent are Peace, Hope, Joy and Love. As we light each of the Advent candles, whether at church or at home, we are called to reflect on those gifts of God and to take them deeper into our hearts and lives as part of our *preparation* for the great festival of Christmas.

So today is the day we light the pink candle. Back in the days when Advent was a more penitential season when some people also practiced fasting, the third Sunday in Advent was less solemn – more, well, joyous. Hence the pink candle.

Joy can be hard in December.

Christmas is the most emotional holiday of the year for a lot of people. People think of home and family – including those who are thousands of miles away in Iraq or Afghanistan, including those who have lost their homes, including those who have lost their families or family members. People think of presents and abundant meals and parties – including those who have lost their jobs or gone bankrupt. People think of bright lights, including those for whom the many hours of darkness and the often dreary cold make depression or melancholy all the more challenging.

People may dream of “a perfect Christmas” and then reflect, sometimes painfully, on the Christmas they are willing to settle for. Some people may pray simply that they can get through Christmas without any family member getting drunk or high. Some people may pray that they *get through* Christmas, period, and may wish they could hit the “fast forward” button and wake up on January 2.

I have a hunch a number of people may feel ambivalent about Christmas beyond those in the situations I’ve mentioned. I love Christmas – mostly – and I have a lot to be personally thankful for, but I am very aware that this will be my first Christmas since my father’s death, and that nothing will ever be the same.

And so, we all come into church this morning as part of our Christian journeys, perhaps to take our minds off the rest of our weeks, to be nourished and to grow spiritually, to enjoy each other’s company, and to be fed with God’s word and sacraments. And here, we get told – told! – by St. Paul in today’s Epistle, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

What planet is this guy on?

Did he ever go through stuff?

Because I haven't mentioned why *this* particular year is so hard for so many people, what with the economy and all. Paul, get real, dude; who are you kidding? What have *you* been through?

St. Paul was not a guy who wrote his letters in his paneled office stuffed with Old Masters paintings in between sips of Chivas Regal until his butler called him to dinner. Hardly.

Paul knew suffering as an apostle of Jesus Christ speaking the truth boldly to those who didn't want to hear it. Taking great risks to spread the life-saving, transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul went through a few things. Let's hear his own words from 2 Corinthians 11:24-28: "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches."

He also had, he adds, extraordinarily wonderful spiritual experiences, but "to keep him from becoming too elated" he received some kind of physical affliction. When he prayed about it, the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." No wonder Paul also wrote in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through *Christ* who strengthens me."

Oh. Going through stuff *doesn't* mean that God has abandoned us. Stuff happens. And some other stuff happens because evil-doers make it happen, and we just may be innocent victims. Hmm. Seen a lot of that this year.

And still Paul says – and *not just* in today's passage – "Rejoice always." Could he have been onto something? Joy is *not* dependent on our *external* circumstances? Joy could come to us deep inside of us, hand-delivered by God to a place where it can't be taken away by external circumstances? This year would be an especially good year to explore *that* possibility!

So, three things. First, if you are feeling "down" in any way, for any reason and to any degree, *own it*. Paul also was not shy about complaining, as you just heard! We may have to "paste on a smiley face" perhaps most of the time regardless of how we're feeling, but I hope that anyone who needs to can find someone trustworthy with whom to open up and be "real." So, the first step towards joy, paradoxically, is to acknowledge, name and "own" any sadness we may have, and to reduce its power by talking about it.

Second step: Let us discover that any hunger we may feel for “a perfect Christmas” is *really* a hunger for something even better: a hunger for **Heaven** and a hunger for the **Kingdom of God**, the only experiences of true perfection we may be able to have. That hunger is a *good* thing. Vague dissatisfaction with even a good Christmas should tell us that we’re hungry for *the best*: what God has in store for those who truly love God. Let us look ahead with faith and hope towards perfect peace, joy and love.

Third step: *in the meantime*, while we look forward with faith and hope to heaven and to the Kingdom of God, let’s do what we can to make this world a little more heavenly.

Right now, the struggle against domestic violence – by aiding and empowering the survivors of domestic violence – is one of St. Barnabas’ mission priorities which attracts a lot of energy and generosity from a lot of people throughout the year. You know how all this activity started here?

In September, 1991, my mother died of cancer. The following Spring, I was not enjoying watching all those commercials on TV in the weeks before Mother’s Day talking about giving gifts to your mother. So I said to myself, O.K., I’m depressed, especially by these gooey ads. *Who’s in worse shape?* And I thought, it must be the absolute pits to be in a shelter for battered women on Mother’s Day.

So, I called up Women Aware and asked if we could collect gifts for the women on Mother’s Day. And they said, “Sure, we get lots of stuff in December and are ignored the other 11 months of the year.” So we had our first ingathering of gifts for the women’s shelter that Mother’s Day. *The gifts circled the altar*. It was awesome. It made *my* day, and I was just one of many givers, never mind the recipients.

After Mother’s day, parishioners came up to me and said, “Because Mother’s Day is over, do we have to stop?” “No,” I said with a smile, and we never have. Joy. Just Thursday I took a car load of comforters, hats, mittens and scarves to the Somerset shelter’s outreach office, and this week we’ll do Middlesex County. More Joy. And when I made the delivery last Thursday a staff member came up and thanked us again for furniture we had given to help a family resettle from Somerset – what, a year ago? *Joy lasts*.

And since I’m missing my father this Christmas, let me tell a “Pop” story. My father was widowed twice, and the September before he died my brother died, so he had that added grief. And, as happens in extreme old age, his body didn’t work as well as it once did; for example, he lost sight in one eye. So, he had a lot to be sad about. So what did he do? He cried with both eyes. Then he dried his eyes, and used his one good eye to read aloud to a friend who was completely blind.

That brought lasting joy to his friend, and to him, and to me. He did what he could to make the world a little more heavenly. Joy happens.

We all can do something. Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things, just small things with great love.”

The cool thing is, if we do something with great love, often we cannot only give joy to others, but get joy too. Sounds like a plan.

Giving love and joy, peace and hope to others may also whet our appetites for the Kingdom of God, where **peace** *reins*, all **hopes** are *fulfilled*, **joy** *abounds*, and God’s **love** *conquers all*.

Joy to the world. We can be a part of it – now, and forever.

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