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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 12, 2021

Year C, 3 Advent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#)

[Philippians 4:4-7](#)

[Luke 3:7-18](#)

[Canticle 9](#)

Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I will say, Rejoice.

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When did you last *rejoice*?

It's not a word we really use that much in our daily lives, is it? It's not that it's unfamiliar. It's not one of those churchy words that don't feel like regular English, like *justification* or *sacraments*. *Rejoice* is a regular word that people on the streets recognize and everyone knows what it means. But we still don't use it much in our everyday speech. Why is that? Could it be because we're not good at doing it?

A few years ago I was at a rehearsal for a choir Julia and I sang in together. There was a children's choir joining us for a piece and two children were singing a solo verse together. But the director thought it was a little too quiet, so she decided to add a third voice. "Amy, you know this part, right?" she said. "Amy, why don't you sing it with them." And Amy went: *Yesssssss!!!!*

And I thought: Amy knows how to rejoice!

How would a lot of us as adults have responded? Anxiety? (*What if I screw up?*) False humility? (*Aw shucks, teacher, not me, I'm not good enough!*) Pride? (*Trying our hardest not to look excited or pleased—yawn, ok, sure, I'll sing it, I've done stuff like this a million times.*) Many of us, I think, would have to admit that we'd have a hard time letting ourselves indulge in the pure, simple fullness of celebration: *Yessss!*

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is sometimes called Gaudete Sunday, which is Latin for Rejoice Sunday. We're just past the halfway point of Advent and traditionally this is a Sunday to "lighten up" a little, a Sunday when pink vestments are worn in some places instead of the deep purple or blue of the rest of the season, which is why our Advent wreath has a pink candle for today. It's a day to look ahead to the joy on the horizon and do some advance rejoicing now. And our scripture readings have that note of rejoicing: God through the prophet Zephaniah tells Jerusalem to rejoice and exult because God is going to bring the people home from exile, and St. Paul writing to the young church in the city of Philippi tells them to rejoice in the Lord always.

Why is it so hard for us to rejoice?

I wonder if it's because we believe, deep down, that we have to earn our salvation—or at least make a big contribution to it. Both the Old and New Testament readings make it very clear that it's God, not us, who is acting. God is showering blessings on us without any expectation of our participation. The good news of Jesus is that God is not a wrathful judge ready to punish for any transgression, but a loving Savior ready to go to any length to save, bless, and forgive. We couldn't save ourselves if we tried. Our role is to receive, to give thanks, to rejoice.

Children like Amy have an advantage in the rejoicing business because they know they can't do it all on their own. Children are champions at *receiving* with joy—that's why we make such a fuss about children at Christmas, and why Christmas tends to be children's favorite time of year—because children are our greatest experts on how to receive a gift with rejoicing. Now you and I have been offered the greatest gift imaginable: salvation from evil and death, acceptance and inclusion into God's kingdom. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn this gift for ourselves. All we can do is joyfully accept it and give thanks. Maybe that's why Jesus says that it's impossible to enter the kingdom of heaven unless you enter it as a little child.

Now there are other reasons it can be hard to rejoice. Reasons that have to do with the world around us. And here's where children maybe have an unfair advantage over adults, because when you're a child your frame of reference is smaller and the adults in your life often try to shelter you from some of the things they're worried about. But adults have to think about things like climate change, like racial inequity, like Omicron variants, like gun violence, like inflation, like conspiracy theories on social media. It can be easy to feel like rejoicing is a luxury we can't afford when the weight of the world is on our shoulders.

That's where we need our scriptures to give us some perspective. Zephaniah's prophecy about Jerusalem being gathered back in is being written *during the exile*. All these good things about the people coming back to Jerusalem and God exulting and singing over them haven't happened yet. Zephaniah is telling the people to rejoice not about all the good things that have been happening for them, but to rejoice right in the middle of the very bad things that are happening for them because they know that the future is in God's hands. It's the same thing with St. Paul. His letter to the Philippians is the sunniest of all Paul's letters. It contains the word "joy" or "rejoice" something like 16 times. And he is writing it *from prison*.

He's been put in chains for preaching Jesus. And he writes that even his imprisonment has helped spread the good news among the soldiers who are guarding him. He writes about how grateful he is that he's learned to be content with being well fed or being hungry, having plenty or having little. Paul would go on to be executed at the hands of the Roman empire. He knows that's a likely possibility as he writes. And he tells the Philippians to rejoice, not about all the ease and worldly prosperity that following Jesus brings, but because the peace and love of God can sustain him and them through the worst of anything this life can bring, and beyond.

So this Gaudete Sunday is a time for us to strengthen our rejoicing muscles, not as Pollyannas who deny the true sorrows of the world, but as Zephaniahs or St. Pauls who know the love and joy of God are present even in the midst of them and will never ultimately be defeated, even if we have to wait with endurance to see that day come.

I remember, when I worked as a hospice chaplain, visiting a patient I'll call Denise. She had a progressive neurological disorder, couldn't communicate, and was mostly asleep. Even when she was awake she was unable to engage with others and seemed unaware of what was going on around her. Her family visited her sometimes, but she didn't recognize them. Her manner was placid and peaceful. And I remember thinking that Denise lived in something like a time of Advent: a time of waiting patiently, in darkness and night, for a release from bondage that for her would likely come only through her death from this life and her awakening into the light of God's presence.

Her caregivers reported just one time when Denise seemed to respond to something. Her son had brought her baby grandchild, and lowered him to her face—and Denise moved her lips to kiss him.

I wonder if that kiss was somehow, for Denise, a way of rejoicing. Giving thanks for the presence of a fellow human being, a child, as dependent and fragile as she was, and as precious and beloved by God.

Advent is a time when we are invited to let ourselves be stripped down to essentials. To put off the pride, anxiety, false humility, and posturing that allow us to pretend that we are sufficient to ourselves. To acknowledge our weakness and dependence, and to allow ourselves to be like little children. To allow ourselves to be loved by God, and to love God in return. To live in the simplicity of what it means to receive our salvation as a free gift. After all, Jesus himself took on all our fragility and dependency in being born among us as a child. And in the gift of the infant Jesus perhaps we ourselves might learn what it is to be God's children.