

“Rejoice In the Darkest Hours”

Thus begins the command and invitation to Gaudete Sunday or Joy Sunday which is celebrated with a rose candle and pink or rose vestments and appointments. Today, we seek to relax a bit from the busy disciplines and preparations for the Christmas season and to enter into a fore-shadowing of the joy which we will celebrate at Christmastide. *“Lift up your hearts! Lift up your voice! Rejoice! Again, I say rejoice!”*

Joy is defined as the emotion evoked by well-being, success or good fortune; by the prospect of possessing what one desires. It is a feeling of delight; a state of happiness or felicity; or bliss. Happiness or felicity like Joy is a feeling of well-being. Whereas happiness is conditional and often short lived, joy is an inner state of security and contentment. Delight is a jumping up and down, hoopla emotion of excitement. And, bliss is a state of perfect calm or euphoria. Christian joy is a state of confident and faithful living with the belief that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord. What then is Gaudete or Advent Joy?

[Advent Three in year C invites God to stir up his power and with great might to come among us to bring joy into our darkest hours. In the midst of judgement and divisions, ecology consternation, wars and strife, economic crises and hopeful fulfillment; a glimmer of light or prevenient joy is seen as we long anew in faithful expectation for the Second Coming of Christ. The prophet Zephaniah envisions disaster, reproach, oppression and exile and calls for songs of joy and exultation. Paul admonishes the Philippians not to worry, to pray always and to rejoice. And, John the Baptist brings stern warnings and offers specific suggestions to all in the crowd, as he challenges his people to live with a hopeful expectation. Christ came, he comes and he will come!]

Through scriptures, prayers and songs today, we seek to hold back premature celebrations as we joyously look forward to the coming of Christmas. In many churches, today it is time for the hanging the Greens, a fore-shadowing of the coming of the season of joy.

I. Prevenient Joy

Prevenient joy is a feeling of confidence and assurance before one possesses the thing that one desires. Zephaniah of the Southern Kingdom of Palestine prophesied around 630 B.C. during the time of Josiah. His prophesy was sandwiched in between the great prophets of the late Eighth and the Seventh centuries B. C. He lived in the aftermath of the wicked kings Manasseh and Amon. Israel was under the domination of Assyria and both were being threatened by the Scythians hordes from the North. Zephaniah was convinced that unless Israel repented of her apostasy, God was going to take his protective shield from around her and allow her to be utterly destroyed.

Their national sins were corrupt political practices, religious accretions and perversion of the faith. Their priests were idolatrous. They allowed the worship of the Assyrian god Milcom. They were lovers of foreign fads and fashions and felt that “the Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.” These transgressions of the laws of God, Zephaniah believed, ate away at God’s protective shield and would allow the enemy to penetrate their God-secured

defensives. The third chapter of Zephaniah, nevertheless, gave a prevenient glimmer of hope to the people of Israel and admonished them to turn from their wicked ways, to rejoice in the Lord and be saved.

[Zephaniah ended his prophesy on this note of prevenient joy as he helps to set the tone for this pink candled Advent Sunday, *“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exalt with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! ... I will remove disaster from you...I will deal with all your oppressors...I will save the lame and gather the outcast...and I will restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.”* Zephaniah 3:14,18a,19,20b.]

Prevenient joy is predicated upon trust in the faithfulness of a loving God. It is also a joy of remembrance. Israel was called to remember whose they were and who they were called to be. In that remembering, she could celebrate prevenient joy.

II. A Contingent Joy

Contingent joy is conditional. It depends upon the human response to what God has already done in Christ Jesus. The evangelist Luke softened the blows of John the Baptist’s message to the crowd. It is not just directed toward the Pharisees and Sadducees alone. His message was universal-to all men and women in the crowd. It even included the tax collectors and soldiers who wished to know what they must do to be saved. Like Zephaniah, John began with a stern indictment, *“You brood of viper (You sons of snakes)! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor.’”* The qualifications for salvation as far as John was concerned would be contingent upon the fruits they bore, not upon who their ancestors were, what their religious affiliation might have been, nor upon their status in life. All would be sifted, weighed and measured. The fruitful would be saved and gathered into God’s kingdom. The unfruitful would be burned like chaff in unquenchable fire.

John’s warning and negative message was for those headed toward destruction. He called them to repentance because the coming messiah, he said, would come bringing wind, sifting and fire.” *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

Certainly, John’s preaching contained enough scary news to the transgressors of God’s laws, but one can find a glimmer of hope in the evangelist’s closing remarks, *“So, with many other exhortations, he (John) proclaimed the good news to the people.”* With Jesus in Luke’s gospel, salvation rather than being contingent upon an earlier response to the law, was predicated upon the after response to the Gospel. Thus in the final analysis on this Gaudete Sunday in Advent, Luke’s words contains a kind of contingent joy, predicated upon the people’s positive response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *“Mortals give thanks and sing, and in triumph evermore!”*

III. Finally, An Anticipatory Joy

Anticipatory joy is faith-fill, positive and, hopeful. As with the sermons on Faith and Hope, Gaudete Sunday projects and celebrates an anticipated joy in the midst of darkness.

In such a time as this one may find such encouragement recorded in the psalms, *“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”* Psalm 30:5. In addition, Paul writes, *“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known by everyone. The Lord is near.”* Philippians 4:4. This kind of rejoicing comes from an inner light, originating in God himself, fueled by faith and hope, and abiding with the Christian even during the darkest of times. A woman born without arms who took care of herself, married and reared children had that joy in her. A gymnast who won the gold with a broken ankle at the Atlanta Olympics had such joy within herself. And you when you refuse to be discouraged by failure or disappointment you will have that joy in you as well.

Paul consequently concluded, *“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayers and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Philippians 4:5-7.

And so, there you have it: Gaudete Sunday, a Sunday of Joy. Joy is a prevenient, contingent and anticipatory feeling of well-being even in the darkest of hour before the dawn of light. It is predicated upon the remembrance of what God has done in the past. It believes that God will do it again. And, it tries to stay calm as one patiently waits upon the fulfillment of the promises of a loving and faithful God.

**Rejoice, the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore!
Mortals, give thanks and sing, and in triumph evermore.**

**Lift up you hearts! Lift up your voice!
Rejoice! Again I say, rejoice! Amen.**

[Addendum: “Lord of all Hopefulness” by Jan Struther, 1901-1953]

**Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
Whose trust, ever childlike, no cares can destroy.
Be there at our waking, and give us we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.**

**Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe.
Be there at our labors, and give us we pray,
Your strength in our hearts, Lord at the noon of the day.**

**Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace.
Be there at our homing, and give us we pray,
Your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.**

**Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
Whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm.**

**Be there at our sleeping, and give us we pray,
Your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.**

A Prelude And Postlude For The Poem (not to be sung)

**Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else but naught to me, save that Thou art.
Be Thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking and sleeping, thy presence is light.]**