

**Advent 3C, 2009**  
**Zephaniah 4:14-20; Song of Isaiah; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3: 7-18**  
**Gaudete! Rejoice!**

A priest friend of mine tells the story of reluctantly dressing for the first time in a gaudy lolly-pink chasuble, and setting sail up the aisle of the church in the processional. He felt foolish – blokes who are blokes don't wear pink. And the congregation also looked stunned at his appearance. All except for his three year daughter. She broke away from her mum and rushed after Dad, lifting up the train of his chasuble in procession. “My daddy's a princess”. And so my friend made his way into the sanctuary: priest in pink and child carrying his train in honour. To little Hannah's eyes, the chasuble was wonderful, her Dad was wonderful – he *was* a princess! The whole world was wonderful. Hannah got the point – she knew instinctively that this was a moment of joy; a party for her to join in. No inhibitions, no learned responses that held her back from joy. And it liberated the adults present.

Rose pink is the traditional colour for this Third Sunday of Advent - Gaudete Sunday – Gaudy Sunday, from the first words of the Latin Mass - “rejoice”.

And this is what our Scriptures do today – urging us to rejoice! Calling us to joy. This rich feast of scripture opens up joy to us as being something more, something different than feelings or emotions of happiness or contentment. We find joy in unexpected places, in unexpected circumstances.

Listen to Paul, in his letter to the people at Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” Paul was writing from prison, awaiting trial. Though in a place of distress, he can be joyful, and speak of the peace of God which surpasses all our worldly understanding, because the Lord is near. His predicament is not weighing on his mind – his concern is to encourage the congregation at Philippi – thanking God for them, praying for them “with joy”, that their “love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight” (1:9). All through his letter he breaks into rejoicing- fourteen times we hear him rejoicing! Rejoicing that Christ is being proclaimed, even by those who are insincere, with selfish ambition; rejoicing in anticipation that the Philippian believers would hold together in full accord and with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Joy, rejoicing in adversity, is a continuous theme with Paul. : in other writings, he speaks of himself as "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10) ; in prison with Silas, beaten and bruised, he sings hymns and prays (Acts 16:25).

Joy, and rejoicing, for Paul, has three critical components:

1. It is “in the Lord” – “Rejoice in the Lord”: the object of our rejoicing or its grounding, the one in whom our joy thrives, is Jesus Christ. And the Lord is near!
2. It's not just occasional bursts of joy: it's continuous rejoicing –“Rejoice in the Lord **always**”.
3. And rejoicing, joy, is not dependent on circumstances –it's not dependent on anyone or anything else. In fact, it's a choice, a willingness, not just a warm glow of response when things hum along nicely. It's the outcome of taking hold of the new life Christ offers us.

Paul celebrates a joy that is a special characteristic of the whole biblical story. Throughout the Bible God's people are moved to praise in the darkest moments. The Old Testament prophets often called God's people to rejoice in difficult circumstances. Listen to the prophet

Zephaniah, speaking to God's people living under oppression and in poverty 27 centuries ago. He is calling Jerusalem to renewal and reform, and promises the mercy of a loving God despite Israel's infidelity: "Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away his judgements against you.....Do not fear...The Lord your God is in your midst.... He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you with his love". God's presence is one of deliverance for the lame and the outcast, in which shame will be turned to praise.

So, from Zephaniah, we learn there is rejoicing in the freedom that comes to us through God's forgiveness. Like Paul, he has a vibrant awareness of God being near, in the midst of his people. And –take hold of this: it's not just us rejoicing – **God** rejoices over **his people**.

And with Isaiah, too – that great sense of joy, despite the people's exile and distress, as God is with them. "With joy you will draw water, from the wells of salvation..... Shout and sing for joy, for great in your midst is the holy one of Israel".

Can you catch the thread here? God's people learning to rejoice in God's presence, even or especially when there seems to be little visible evidence to support it.

At first glance, the gospel text doesn't offer much reason for joy. But once we move past John's fiery words, "You brood of vipers", we're invited to a deeper look, as Christian commentator John Morris writes: "underneath the holy fire is holy joy. If the Baptizer can be described as a killjoy, it is because the joy that he kills is the false joy of manufactured sentimentality and superficial jolliness."<sup>i</sup>

What we see are different groups of people –the crowds, tax collectors, soldiers, all asking John "what should we do?" John tells each in turn to let go of the natural inclinations of their trade or lifestyle. Basically John is telling them to be freed from their fullness of self, and the temporary and temporal seeking after material icons of pleasure, and instead receive a life that leads to the fullness of life. In that, there is joy. It's "rejoicing in the Lord", not rejoicing in our success, the money we have, the gifts we're given. Underneath John's stern message is the good news that a better world is possible by the grace and power of God. And as we've heard, Zephaniah said it thousands of years ago. Paul wrote it in the first century.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Rejoice –not because things are good; but because the Lord is near, in our midst, offering forgiveness, fullness of life, renewal, and the peace that surpasses all understanding. Rejoice because of who God is.

To finish –on a day when we're called to rejoice, how can I resist finishing with a joke?

After his first time ever Christmas service, the little boy was asked what it was like, "I want some of that `umphant.'" " 'Umphant' - What's that?" the child was asked. "You know, it's what those people were singing about-- `O Come all ye faithful, joyful and try umphant'. I'd like to try some of that `umphant."<sup>ii</sup> "Wouldn't we all? And wouldn't we all like to share it around?"

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<sup>i</sup> Refiner's fire [Christian Century](#), Dec 6, 2000 by [John C. Morris](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Refiner's fire [Christian Century](#), Dec 6, 2000 by [John C. Morris](#)