

"How To Rejoice"

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

December 11, 2011

3rd Sunday in Advent

People, it's time to rejoice! After two weeks in this penitential season of Advent, the church designated the third Sunday as a time for rejoicing. It indicated this by having a pink candle in the Advent wreath lit on the third Sunday. This light and cheery color was to be in contrast with the dark and somber purple candles and even in contrast with the dark blue candles of the present time.

This announcement may have struck you as odd in a couple of ways. First of all, you probably didn't know that we are supposed to especially penitent during the Advent season. Isn't this supposed to be a happy time? The removal of the *Gloria in Excelsis* from the liturgy during this time is supposed to make that point but many people probably don't get it.

Secondly, you probably don't even know how to rejoice. You think you know how since our culture talks a lot about being happy, especially during this time of year. This morning, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, let us consider how and why to rejoice during this season of Advent.

The world knows nothing of Advent and what it means. Even worse, it knows nothing of being penitent and what that means. To be penitent requires one to admit being wrong and being accountable to someone. No one want to admit being wrong. Everyone wants to be accountable only to themselves. Besides, even if you are going to allow for being sorry for sin, now doesn't seem to be the time to do it. Now is a time for shopping and buying, getting and having, indulging and partying.

We in the church aren't much better. Not every church knows of or celebrates Advent. Even in those churches that do, it is seen as little more than a pre-Christmas. Following the world's lead, we ignore this penitential stuff or get past it as fast as possible. We want to get the happy decorations up in the church and get to the joyful Christmas hymns and carols in our worship as soon as we can.

Why? Because Jesus' birth is a happy time, isn't it? One reason we have that idea is because of our representation of that birth. Our manger scenes are full of cute figurines which make them such pleasant sights. They are like dolls – not very realistic and certainly nothing like the reality of a baby being born in a barn.

Another reason we have such a happy and naïve view of Jesus' birth, even when we consider the harshness of it, is because we never really ask ourselves how difficult it was and why it was so difficult. A mother giving birth to a baby in a cold barn without modern medical assistance and using a feed trough full of hay as a cradle is very difficult to imagine in our antiseptic age. We may feel a tinge of sadness as we blame the primitive times, the poverty in which Mary and Joseph lived, or a cruel innkeeper for not finding more appropriate lodging the couple.

But the difficulty of Jesus' birth was not the fault of primitive times, poverty, or insensitive innkeepers. Each one of us here is to blame. Jesus did not have to be born in the first place. The only reason He came into the world in the first place was because of our sins. He came to be our Savior from sin. Had we not sinned, He never would have been born in that stable on the Christmas night.

If you feel bad that your sin caused a baby to be born in such difficult conditions, that's not the worst of it. The worst part is that the Son of God had to leave His throne in heaven to come to earth. He had to humble Himself as Ruler of the Universe to be a baby in a manger. He had to leave aside His divine power and glory and submit Himself to the pain and suffering of this caused by the creatures He had created. It would be like you leaving behind the comforts of your home, your strength as a human being, and your independence as a rational creature to become an ant and live in an ant farm – only much worse.

So, consider the incarnation of the Son of God during this Advent time – God taking on human flesh. Look at a realistic nativity scene – not the stylized ones or the idealized ones – consider the humility and suffering involved, both in what is seen and in what is not seen, and realize that it is

because of you and your sin that it happened. Advent is the perfect time to reflect upon our sin and be penitent.

Since we don't know how to be penitent at this time of year, it follows that we don't know how to rejoice, either. Rejoicing is often tied to getting and having stuff. Our merchants have been pushing us to buy stuff since before Halloween so that we might be truly happy at Christmas time. It's bad enough that those outside of the church have bought into this ideology. The sad thing is that many Christians have fallen for the lie that stuff is what you should rejoice over.

The fact of the matter is that if you are counting on Christmas presents to make you truly happy, you will eventually be disappointed 100% of the time. Some will be disappointed because they don't have anything. Some will be disappointed because they don't get exactly what they want. Even if you get what you want and all that you want and are happy for awhile, you will still be disappointed because the happiness is only temporary. Next Christmas, you are going to want stuff again and everything from this year will be forgotten. Even the stuff that you have and keep doesn't last. Every toy and trinket, electronic gizmo, article of clothing, candy, and so will be destroyed when Jesus comes again in judgment.

St. John writes in his first epistle, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away." If you attach your hope for happiness to the things in this world, you'll go down when it goes down.

We are in a strange situation. We want to be happy when we should be should be penitent. We are disappointed when we should rejoice. How do we resolve this?

Take another look at the Baby in the manger. Even when you realize that this was a difficult situation for any baby; when you realize that this was a humiliating experience for the Son of God; when you realize that it was your sin that brought this all to be, you can remember that Jesus did not

do this because He was forced or coerced. He came into this world in this way only because He loved you and wanted to redeem you from your sin, no matter what the cost.

He came, not only to be born, but to live under the Law for you. He did what was required of you by God: to live in perfect harmony with the will of God. He obeyed every Law of God for you. He did all the good required by God - for you. He did none of the evil forbidden by God – for you. He did all of this for you that His holiness might be put on your account before God. Jesus did all of that because you couldn't do it.

He came, not only to live for you, but to die for you. Jesus endured all that you deserved for your transgressions of God's Law. He went to the cross to suffer the punishment for your sin: separation from God. He was physically separated from the Father by His death. He was spiritually separated from the Father when the Father turned away from him. Jesus suffered all that was required of sinners so that you wouldn't have to suffer. Jesus rose from the dead so that you, too, would rise from death to life and from the grave to heaven.

When you come to God, with repentance for your sin and faith in Jesus Christ, you get all that He has to give you: forgiveness for any and every sin, a new life and relationship with God, and salvation from death and hell.

This leads us directly into how we rejoice. Our rejoicing is not dependent on what we have, but who we are. In Holy Baptism, each of us was made a child of God. There is nothing this world can offer that is remotely comparable to being a child of God.

Our possessions, whether many or few, are not the reasons for our rejoicing. Jesus says, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19-20) We recognize that so many of the things for which we strive and work and sweat and toil will not last. Instead, we remember that we have the

one and only thing that lasts forever: eternal life in heaven. Nothing can destroy it and no one can steal, no matter what our lot in life here is.

This is why Paul can write in our epistle, “Rejoice always!” We always have reason to rejoice in who we are as children of God. We always have reason to rejoice in what we have – a right relationship with God now and forever.

Combine this with “pray without ceasing” and “give thanks in all circumstances” and we will never be disappointed. When we are always praying for what we need (instead of complaining) and when we are always giving thanks for what we have (instead of being disappointed over what we do not have), then we will always rejoice.

Most important than just rejoicing over our lives now, we can look with joy to the consummation of all things when Christ returns in glory for judgment. The God of peace has sanctified us completely – made us holy – in baptism. He will keep us blameless in our life here through the application of His Word in preaching, in absolution, and in the Lord’s Supper. That is the way the Lord will find us when He come because He who called you – God – is faithful. He will do it.

Let us reclaim the meaning of Advent for our church that we might rightly celebrate Christmas. Use the time to repent of your sin in sadness and faith. See the Christ Child, not as a holiday decoration or even a baby born in tough times, but as the Savior of the world who voluntarily came into the world in this way out of His great love for you. He came to bring the greatest and most long lasting presents ever –the love of God, forgiveness of sin, and eternal life with Him in heaven. Rejoice always as a result of that. Pray without ceasing for that. Give thanks in all circumstances – both good and bad, plenty and poverty, happy or sad - because of that. For your joy, your blessing, and your celebration will not and cannot be confined to a day or even a season. They last forever. Amen.