

“How to Rejoice”
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

December 17, 2017

3rd Sunday of Advent

Well, are you all “happied” out yet? After being encouraged, urged, and possibly even coerced into having a “Happy Holidays!” or a “Merry Christmas!” over and over again, seemingly since before Halloween, you may have just reached a boiling point. There is just so much celebrating going on! There are Christmas cards and letters to be sent out to let people know what a happy year you just had. There are a seemingly never-ending number of Christmas/Holiday parties to attend: school, work, and every group and organization to which you belong. There are innumerable gifts to buy and receive, as well as an endless supply of really good food that is really bad for you to be eaten. Celebrate, celebrate, celebrate! Buy, buy, buy! Eat and drink, eat and drink, eat and drink! You may get to the point where you think that if you hear just one more Merry Christmas, have one more party to attend, or have to face the mall one more time, you’re going to turn into the character in the movie *Home Alone 2* who cries out in a very loud voice, “Merry Christmas, ya filthy animal!” before picking up a machine gun and spraying the room with bullets.

It is this constant emphasis on celebrating and being happy that makes the Church’s tradition of displaying a pink candle in the Advent wreath on the Third Sunday of Advent almost meaningless. People do not know that this Sunday was traditionally a time for rejoicing because they didn’t know that the time before Christmas was supposed to be anything but a time of happiness. Our culture, our economy, and our civil religion demand that we always be happy and always rejoice, especially at this time of the year when we were supposed to be especially happy.

There is a sadness associated with the observation of an Advent season, whether our world knows it or not. The source of all sadness is sin. Sin – that is, any offense against the law of God – is such an agent of sadness because it offends the God who created everything that exists, who established order in the universe, and who has determined what is right and what is wrong. Just thinking about that should make us sad and, perhaps, afraid. Who wants to offend God?

Sin also hurts us and, therefore, makes us sad. When we sin, either by doing evil which God forbids or not doing all of the good which God commands, we hurt ourselves. We cut ourselves off from a loving God who desires to bless us. Sin divides us from one another and causes us to ruin our relationships with one another. Ultimately, the worst consequence of sin is that it sends us to a place even worse than this one. It sends us to hell.

But there is more to the sadness of sin than just how it affects God or any of us. It is how it affects Jesus. The reason for the slightly sad and partially penitential nature of Advent is what we think the reason for joy and celebrating at this time of year is all about, namely, Jesus’ coming. To us, this is all a good and happy thing. To many people, even unbelievers, the story of the Nativity evokes at least a response of sentimentality and cuteness. It’s all good. There’s nothing bad or sad in Jesus coming to this earth.

Of course, that's because we make Christmas all about ourselves. For one thing, we want to skip Advent all together and hurry on to Christmas. At Christmas, we want to keep everything happy, whether it's about the fat old man in a red suit or a cute little baby in a manger. Once we make the jump with the culture, past Advent to Christmas, and begin all of the Christmas merriment months early, then not only do we fail to see the sadness of Advent, but Advent itself makes no sense at all.

While the results of Jesus coming are happy, the reason for Jesus coming is not. Jesus was not born in this world in order to facilitate a cute and happy winter holiday. Jesus came to this world to deal with the very ugly problem of sin and the very frightful consequence of sin, namely, death. There was simply no easy way to deal with these problems, no Hallmark moment to make us feel good or happy about. Simply put, Jesus was born to die. And what an ugly death it was! There is no getting around it. The Son of God was brutally nailed to a wooden cross and was left hanging there until he died.

And if the method of Jesus' death was not sad enough, the reason for Jesus' death is even sadder. Jesus did not die because he was unable to prevent. Jesus did not die because he deserved it. Jesus died because he willingly and voluntarily offered up His life for the sins of people who deserve to die – you and me. He experienced all the suffering and the pain for all sins. He endured the wrath of God again sin which should have been directed against you and me, but, instead, was directed full force against Jesus. When you look at a crucifix (which cleans up the roughness of that event much like our Nativity scenes cleanup the roughness of that event) and realize, not only that you deserved every bit of that suffering and death, but also that Jesus took it upon Himself for you and in your place, how sad and bad that makes us feel. How happy would you feel and how much celebrating would you take part in, if a friend died in a car accident for which you were responsible?

Jesus coming again is the same. Although the results of Jesus coming a second time is good for His people, the events and purpose for His coming are also sad. He comes at the end of the world for a sad reason. He comes to judge the people and to cast millions of people into hell. Therefore, when contemplating these comings and AdVent and in the End Times, there is sadness, knowing we are the reason for his first coming, and fear, knowing why he is coming the 2nd time.

One way to avoid all of this sadness, guilt, and fear is simply to eliminate Advent or, being unable to do that, at least ignore Advent. Make everything about Christmas and happiness. And then along the lines of the 70's song which bemoaned "looking for love in all the wrong places", we begin to look for joy in all the wrong places.

Like "fake news" which is all the rage today, we pursue fake joy. This is to be found in the things which are supposed to make you happy but, in the long run, don't. It's things in the holiday season like excessive use of alcohol, food, gifts, money, and so on which feel good and attempt to make you happy but only fool you. It seems no matter how much of things like this we have, we are left with a very empty feeling the first week of January.

Then there are things which provide true happiness, but are only temporary. There are all the parties and programs to attend; family get-togethers; the giving and

receiving of gifts; holiday food and drink in moderation; and so on. These are all good things, mind you, and in no way am I attempting to be some sort of Ebenezer Scrooge. However, if this is all or mainly what our Advent and Christmas is all about, then we are left with a wistful and, perhaps, sad feeling when it's all over.

It is into this setting of guilt and sorrow over our Savior's coming and our inability to substitute something happy to cover the guilt and sorrow that the purpose for the Third Sunday in Advent becomes much clearer for us. Despite the sin, guilt, death, punishment which we all deserve because of our sin, there is still joy as we prepare for Him to come.

Jesus came into this world; was born as a tiny baby in difficult circumstances; and died a brutal and horrible death because He loved you and me. He wanted to do everything that He did. He wanted to take your sin from you. He wanted to suffer the punishment due that sin for you. He wanted to earn forgiveness for you. And he wanted to bring you life as God intended for it to be – a life which goes past the grave and into eternity. Jesus comes, not to make a religious point, but actually to do something for our good: namely, bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation

There is, therefore, joy in the Advent season. In the midst of a penitential season in which we reflect on our sin, there is to be found joy in WHY Jesus came, and WHAT He came to do. The circumstances in Jesus coming, living, suffering and dying are not happy by any stretch of the imagination. However, the results of Jesus coming, his living, his suffering and especially, his dying, bring us great joy. Therefore, the lightness of the color for the third candle in the wreath – pink – are a constant reminder of that joy.

This is why Paul can write what he does to the people in Thessalonica in our text for today. He says, "Rejoice always." Rejoicing is not a seasonal attitude nor a scheduled activity on our church calendar. It is an activity that we have and an attitude that we display in all times and in all situations. Rejoicing is not achieved by basing our hope on those activities or possessions that bring fake joy or temporary joy.

Instead, Paul gives a list of ways in which we rejoice. Rejoice is done through the other activities mentioned in our text: praying, giving thanks, not quenching the Spirit, and not despising prophecy. We test everything in order to determine that which is good and that which is bad; that which is biblical and that which is not biblical; that which is helpful and that which is hurtful. We hold on to that which is good and we abstain from everything that is evil. Doing these things will not mean a life that is trouble-free, but will provide true and lasting joy. But how, you might ask? Doing those things are very difficult. We are sinful human beings who are used to having everything that we want and to complain about that which we do not have.

Paul says, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely." That is, God will make you holy because of the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to suffer, die, and rise again. He forgives you all your sins; strengthens you in your faith through His Word and Sacraments; and gives you joy to live in the midst of sorrow and fear.

But that's not all! Paul says, "May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." He will keep you without blame (i.e.

guilt), prepared for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and ready for heaven where your joy will be made complete and circumstances will never threaten it again.

How do we know that this will happen? Paul says, "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." God is kept every promise that He has ever made, from the time of the beginning of sin to the time of the end of the world. He is faithful. And He will do it.

We don't ever like to deprive ourselves of anything. We want to indulge ourselves in everything. However, one of the side effects of this self-indulgence is that we don't gain an appreciation for what we have. Fasting gives us a greater appreciation for food. Denying ourselves sweets make sweets taste even better when the time of denial is over. Working hard makes us appreciate our time of rest even more. The pink candle lit on this Sunday in Advent makes no sense and cannot be appreciated without the dark blue candles of the other three weeks. We take seriously the penitential nature of Advent even though it conflicts greatly with the culture and society around us which are deeply involved already in Christmas and the material mode of dealing with things. However, this penitential season helps us to appreciate the reason for our joy and enables us, despite difficult situations around us and the situation within us because of sin, to rejoice always. And that is a joy that will never end. Amen.