

Fr. John's Homily
3rd Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2021

We light the rose colored candle today, the Third Sunday of Advent. This Sunday is called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word for rejoice. And the word Rejoice here is more of a command, not a suggestion of what could be. Rejoice, Rejoice, Rejoice! Rejoicing stands out in our prayers, songs and readings this weekend. In God's words we hear today: *"Sing joyfully, O Israel! Shout with Exultation, O city of Zion! Rejoice in the Lord always!"* And with John the Baptist we hear: *"now the people were filled with expectation!"* There was an excitement and joy from the prophet preparing hearts for the coming of the Lord. The joy of the Lord fills our hearts because God is near; He is with us.

Look at our First Reading, it is a prophecy of Prophet Zephaniah to the people of Israel when infidelity to God was very high. Therefore, the worship of God was at a very low level. Sounds very similar to our present day. However, there was a remnant who remained faithful to the true worship of God. The prophecy was a prophecy of hope and encouragement to the remnant faithful, even when the people of God were going through desolate times. Time of crises can stifle joy in our life and leave us sad. Many of us may find ourselves in such times. Can we who find ourselves in difficult times find reason to Rejoice? This is what the prophet was proclaiming to the Israelites. How could Zephaniah say such words and believe them in a way that would encourage or convince God's remnant to believe and to Rejoice?

Taking a closer look at Zephaniah and you can find reasons to rejoice. His main theme is the coming of the day of the Lord. There will be days of God severely punishing the nations, including Judah, as they have turned their hearts away from God. But he also makes it clear that even in this time, God will be merciful toward his people. The people being his faithful remnant. To His remnant we hear, the Lord has removed the judgment against you. This is reason to Rejoice. The King of Israel is in your midst. This is a reason to Rejoice. Like all prophets, Zephaniah proclaims God's love even in the pending doom and destruction. God love us, and God pardons us and invites us to be renewed in His love. Yes, there is reason to Rejoice.

We know these words of Zephaniah, or any of the prophets, remain just words if the people of God don't put them into practice. And if we the people of God would truly believe and allow God's word to be effective within us, then, God, in his infinite mercy, will replace their sadness with joy. God will remove the judgement against them, and turn away their enemies. Therefore we no longer need to be afraid or discouraged. God is renewing us in His love. This is the reason to

shout with joy and sing joyfully to God. For our God is close to us and is renewing us in His love.

The psalmist prays, to be near to God is my happiness. This is a reason to rejoice. Remaining close to God will always be a reason to rejoice. Maybe this is why Paul could express the joy and rejoicing of the Lord as he often states in his letters. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make requests known to God. And remember Paul did not have an easy life once he gave himself to Jesus, but no matter what He always had reason to rejoice. Advent Christmas Season is about this faith in God's tremendous love. This is why Paul could state with all his heart: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!"*

If we want hearts that Rejoice, we have to allow God to be God in our lives. God has to be the center of everything we do and say. God has to be the reason we live, and move and have our being. God definitely has to be the center of all our activities during this Advent Christmas Season. But we know He is not always the center of our lives. This is why it's good to listen to another Prophet, John the Baptist. His message of repentance is about calling God's people back to God, making sure that God is God of our lives, our hearts, our relationships, our work, and our families, our everything.

In the Gospel, John the Baptist emphasizes an invitation to repentance and an invitation to charity. John the Baptist invites us to help, support and be charitable to those in need. Our acts of charity make us instruments of joy to others. Charity also helps us get out of ourselves and every time we do this is a reason to have joy. The joy of being God's servants, the joy of helping others, the joy of touching the lives of others.

John the Baptist invites us to repent and turn away from all things that separate us from God. Selfishness, dishonesty, and greed. As our Advent journey continues and as we approach the celebration of Christmas, again we pray for open hearts that the joy of the Lord may be our strength. As we seek God's grace, and pray for openness to God and His ways, making every effort to live it, then we know that Rejoice is not only a hope, but a way of life. Like the hearts of prophets, like the hearts of St. Paul and the heart of our Blessed Mother. God was the center of their lives, they had rejoicing hearts. Let's pray for this grace in our hearts this Advent Christmas season.