

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, 2020 Homily

**Isaiah 61:1-11; Psalm (Magnificat, Luke 1:46f); I Thess. 5:16-24;  
John 1:6-8, 19-28**

If you asked my wife if I was a very joyful person, she would say, "no" My children would say the same thing. Oh, there are moments in my life when I am joyful, but I struggle. My mind is rarely a friend to me. I share this information so you know that the below reflections on joy come from a person who loves God, but who struggles to live joy. I am caught in the trap of finding or "needing" happiness from what I do and/or from affirmation of others. I am a fellow pilgrim on the journey with you. I am a fellow prisoner of happiness in search of the freedom of joy.

For centuries the Church has invited us in the third week of Advent to reflect on Joy. The pink candle and vestments remind us that something is different. While Advent is a season of waiting and preparation, the Church understands that the birth of Jesus and the Second Coming of Christ are such deep and joy-filled realities that joy ought to be part of our preparations. Thus, the joy of Christmas is not only something we prepare for, it is also something we enter into, now. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." Amen!

Joy is found throughout the Scriptures. In our Old Testament reading, Isaiah proclaims, "I rejoice heartily in the LORD, in my **God is the joy of my soul.**" The focal point of Isaiah's rejoicing and his joy is God. God is the joy of his soul.

Rejoicing and joy go hand in hand. God created us with the capacity to rejoice and to experience joy that is beyond fleeting pleasures or instant gratifications. Joy is beyond or deeper than anything money can buy, a promotion can offer or a vacation can bring.

In his encyclical, *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis illuminates what he calls, "A stream of joy" found throughout the Scriptures. In referring to the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles he writes, "The Gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ's cross, constantly invites us to rejoice. A few examples will suffice. "Rejoice!" is the angel's greeting to Mary (*Lk* 1:28). Mary's visit to Elizabeth makes John leap for joy in his mother's womb (cf. *Lk* 1:41). In her song of praise, Mary proclaims: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (*Lk* 1:47). When Jesus begins his ministry, John cries out: "For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled" (*Jn* 3:29). Jesus himself "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (*Lk* 10:21). His message brings us joy: "I have said these things to you, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (*Jn* 15:11). Our Christian joy drinks of the wellspring of his brimming heart. He promises his disciples: "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (*Jn* 16:20). He then goes on to say: "But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (*Jn* 16:22). The disciples "rejoiced" (*Jn* 20:20) at the sight of the risen Christ. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that the first Christians "ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (2:46). Wherever the disciples went, "there was great joy" (8:8); even amid persecution they continued to be "filled with joy" (13:52). The newly baptized eunuch "went on his way rejoicing" (8:39), while Paul's jailer "and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God" (16:34). **Why should we not also enter into this great stream of joy?"**

Pope Francis' question is worthy of consideration. The Biblical witness is clear, there is a "great stream of joy" that runs throughout salvation history. What hinders us from entering? Why do we not jump in?

I am reminded of a canoe trip with my wife, Janet, and our black lab puppy, Kara. (A side note: Kara means "Joy" or "giver of joy" in Greek.) At one point, due to a fallen tree and faster water, our canoe went sideways. For a moment, the foaming water came up to the side of our boat. Before I could get the canoe in the right direction, Kara jumped out in the foaming water. Down she went. The fast current swept her right under the canoe. Fortunately, she popped back up just within my arms reach. I was able to grab her by her neck and bring her back to safety. Kara would eventually

love the water and find great joy in it, but it took a long time for her to get over her traumatic experience. I can imagine as the foaming water came near the boat's edge Kara jumped for joy, having no idea how fast the water was moving or what the foam really was.

Many of us have experienced joy at the moment of faith or the moment we first encountered God's mercy and grace. We rejoiced at the gift of God's forgiveness and redeeming love. The invitation to enter God's joy through faith and love compelled us to jump in. However, it wasn't long before we were swept under by our struggles and in fear and self-preservation started grasping for air and saving ourselves, grabbing on to happiness offered by the world. I know it's true for me. I have experienced God's joy, yet I continue to choose fleeting happiness. I grab onto what seems safe, yet will never truly satisfy my hunger for the true and eternal joy I was created for. I, like many of us, am still learning what it means to live and swim freely in the stream of God's joy.

The author of Hebrews writes of Jesus, "For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). For Jesus, joy and the cross were not mutually exclusive. Instead, Jesus immersed himself in the joy of intimacy with God knowing that joy would not erase suffering and shame, but would help him through it. Jesus remained in the stream of God's joy even through suffering.

For us, the challenges and struggles of life and this pandemic make it hard to enter or stay within the great stream of Joy. Fear and worldly attachments hinder our ability to jump in. Yet, to jump into the stream of God's joy, to immerse ourselves in God, is to willingly let God alone be the joy of our souls.

I recently came across this quote, "How is it possible to be joyful when there is sorrow in our lives? The answer is that joy in its deepest sense is not dependent on positive circumstances or upbeat feelings. Joy means having an encounter with God's infinite love for us, which is always present in our lives. It 'adapts and changes, but always endures,' even amid great sorrow. It takes the form of a quiet assurance, a reminder that we are

God's beloved sons and daughters. At other times, joy means that one 'rejoices with the truth' (I Corinthians 13:6), praising aloud the Lord and thanking him for his gifts. But above all, joy comes from 'an expansion of the heart' through prayer and gestures of love toward others" (*The Family Fully Alive, Building the Domestic Church p.13*).

The Apostle Paul, like Jesus and the Saints, lived in the freedom of God's joy even in the midst of hardships and encourages us to do the same. In our second reading from I Thessalonians Paul says, "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." In all circumstances we are to rejoice. That's living immersed in the stream of God's joy. Paul has jumped in. For Paul, rejoicing was a way of life. We are called to live in the stream of God's joy and pray without ceasing. To pray without ceasing is to have a God consciousness throughout our day. To be with God each moment and thus draw strength, hope, courage, and joy from God. In Philippians 4:4 Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord Always, Again I say rejoice."

The third week of Advent reminds us of God's eternal stream of joy. While we wait in difficult times, we wait in the truth that Jesus "who was, who is and, who is to come" is our eternal joy. The Bible isn't talking about temporary happiness, or fleeting excitement, but a deep fundamental reality that is beyond our ability to purchase or even chase after. Joy is a gift.

Where there is true joy, there is God. John the Baptist learned this at an early age. In fact, he was in the womb of Elizabeth when Mary came to visit her. Jesus, God with us, was in the womb of Mary and upon hearing the greeting we are told, the child (John the Baptist) leaped for joy. (Luke 1:44).

John the Baptist jumped for joy at Mary's greeting. His joy would continue to grow and was lived out through his purpose giving testimony to Christ. John was not the light, but came to bear testimony to the light. God was the joy of John the Baptist's soul. His joy was found in fulfilling his purpose and living the words he spoke, "He (Jesus) must increase, I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Mary also jumped into God's great stream of joy when she said, "Yes" to the angel and opened her womb and her very soul to God's will and unique purpose as the mother of Jesus, the mother of the Savior of the world. In Mary's joy and testimony she sang, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

We too are called to live in the stream of God's joy. We are called to live out our unique purposes testifying to the world that God is the way of joy. God is the joy of our souls.

I pray we will have the the courage and open hearts to jump into the stream of God's joy and, regardless of our circumstances, stay there in God's presence, love and Spirit where true joy is found. When God is the joy of our souls, no one can take our joy away.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve

"But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you" (Psalm 5:11).

"So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22).