

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-
Zephaniah 3: 14-18 Psalm 12 Philippians 4: 4-7 Luke 3: 10-18
By: *Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

Here's one for the "old timers." What was the Latin name for this, the third Sunday in Advent? It was called "Gaudete" Sunday; based on the spirit of the first two readings and, in particular, for the opening word in the Philippians reading: "Rejoice (Gaudete) in the Lord always." (In fact, "joy" and "rejoice" appear throughout this letter (1:4, 18; 2: 2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3: 1; 4: 1.) So, catching this spirit, I thought we might focus on that reading for today's reflections. When preaching from Paul, it helps to get a sense of the whole letter; this one is brief enough to do that. In addition, reading the entire letter this week, might provide a good source of meditation and prayer for the preacher. So, what is Paul's reasons for rejoicing? Is he being a Pollyanna in an otherwise cruel world? Is he being realistic, or has he buried his head in the sand?

Throughout this letter runs the theme of "partnership" (1:5), a term Paul takes from Roman legal language. Paul reminds the people in Philippi that they are all working for the same goal they are partners. For example, before today's passage begins, he calls for unity between Euodia and Syntyche, two prominent women in the community who had labored with him in the gospel (4:2). This appeal gives us an insight into the community and the differences that existed among them. So, while the two women may be at odds with one another, Paul encourages them to come together and be of one mind. He was writing to people who were once strangers but had become part of his family through baptism. And more, they are his partners in the work of the gospel, sharing his hardships and making personal sacrifice to help and encourage him. Even though there were conflicts in the Philippian church, nevertheless, they were the recipients of Paul's affection because they were faithful and generous servants of the Lord. Though he knows of their struggles, Paul also knows of their fidelity and so he has personal reasons to say, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

The church never seems to be living in ideal circumstances; I am sure that throughout the ages Christians have said, "This is the worst is has ever been!" Yet one has suspicions that when the church is thriving it may be because we may have accommodated ourselves to the prevailing political, social and economic environment. Individual Christians also have to wonder: have I purchased my comfortable life at the price of living more faithfully the gospel call to follow

Christ? This isn't a matter of suffering for the sake of pain; but a challenge to examine our lives, to see if we have avoided social and even physical discomfit so that we can fit in and be "just like everybody else."

The Advent community has much on its mind. As a church and as individual Christians we can feel weighed down: we wait feeling incomplete, filled with longing and a sense of being at odds with others because of our faith. Nevertheless, we are together, not yet completely united, but nevertheless, we look around at this eucharistic celebration and rejoice over others who also believe and worship with us. We have our differences over political parties, liturgical practices, personality types, and economic status. Like Euodia and Syntyche, we clash within our own church at the parish school, council and finance board meetings. We may be more aware of our difference than what unites us. But with Paul we "rejoice," for as the Philippians were "partners" with Paul, so are we partners with one another--- or as Paul also puts it, we are "co-athletes" in the gospel (4:3). During our worship today, we give thanks in particular for those close friends, colleagues and witnesses of faith whose lives have touched us and whose example and company sustain us amid doubts and hesitations. We have reason to join Paul, who says, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Paul, as a witness to the gospel, was arrested, thrown out of towns where he preached and, several times, was beaten. He is writing this letter from his jail cell maybe in Rome, Ephesus or Caesarea. From there he writes to a harassed Philippian community---- and of all things, he tells them to "rejoice!" There were no visible reasons to rejoice; in fact, things looked very glum. There must have been another factor, some other source, for Paul's encouragement to the community to rejoice. Paul isn't just telling them and us to "put on a happy face." What he believes, despite evidence to the contrary in the church's own internal struggles and the pressures from the surrounding world, is that "the Lord is near." At times, it may seem that we are struggling up stream without a paddle, but Paul calls us to look with eyes of faith. We are not on our own, trying to someday finally get to heaven. Rather, "the Lord is near" at this moment, with us even in the mess and ambiguity of daily life.

Nothing from the outside can affect our relationship with Christ; unless we give in to the voices of discouragement and criticism. Despite the pressures to turn elsewhere for encouragement, comfort and convenience, the Lord is always near to us to strengthen our resolve. Paul advises, "Have no anxiety..." not because we have the power to calm ourselves, but because of the faith Paul is proclaiming today to us----"the Lord is near." Therefore, we can, through Christ's nearness and

under the impetus of his Spirit, express our concerns in trusting prayer to God. It is God who can change our anxiety into "the peace that surpasses all understanding." Hence we have reason to, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Paul's encouragement to "prayer and petition with thanksgiving" may provide another basis for rejoicing. He is reminding us that God is concerned for us in the daily specifics of life. Biblical prayer is particular; it flows out of the exigencies we face trying to be faithful Christians. Paul reminds us that God is concerned about what is on our minds, what troubles our hearts, and hence, what may be causing us anxiety. He invites us to bring these issues to God, in prayer and petition. Trusting that God hears us and is on our side, may be reason to, "Have no anxiety...." This confidence may also be the reason Paul feels he can call us to "Rejoice in the Lord always."

But "prayer and petition" are to be accompanied by thanksgiving. Here Paul is encouraging us to open our eyes and not miss our ever-present and generous God. God nourishes and stands by us in our daily struggle to live our Christian vocation. Our God is not sitting around waiting to hear from us in prayer. Rather, God is always active on our behalf. It is appropriate then that Paul directs us to a prayer of thanksgiving as a response to our gracious God. Our life is in God's hands, and a prayer of thanksgiving reminds us of our dependance on God for all that matters in life. Thus, one more reason to "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Paul gives us another reason to rejoice God's gift of peace. While Paul hasn't promised that all our petitions will be answered as we wish, he does assure us that God's peace will be in our hearts and minds. "Shalom" ---peace, has its roots in the Hebrew scriptures. Such peace is profound and deeply felt. It is more than the absence of conflict. It comes from a deeply felt order, a sense that we have our priorities right and that things are in their proper place. Such peace does not make us indifferent or detached from the pain of the world around us. Indeed, with this peace we can address ourselves to the most difficult issues, knowing God stands with us in the struggle. Even when we are going through our own storms, with this peace, we have a sense of confidence in God's "daily bread." Such peace is not bought by gold; it is a gift from God. Paul has given another reason to "Rejoice in the Lord always."

These Advent days will have no end of rush and much potential unrest. The world is in pain. Many of us have family issues that distract and unsettle us. The shopping and commerce of these days makes us wonder how we can call the season "holy". Yet, Paul reminds us, "the Lord is near" we can entrust our needs

into God's hand and that peace is the gift God is waiting to give to us. So, Paul is not being unrealistic, or a blind optimist indeed he is a very practical realist as he exhorts us, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice!"

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Kevin W. Irwin, A GUIDE TO THE EUCHARIST AND HOURS: ADVENT-CHRISTMAS. (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1986).

This is a detailed commentary on both the Eucharistic celebrations (Scriptures and Sacramentary texts) and the prayer of the Hours through the Advent/Christmas season. It includes the daily liturgical celebrations. It's a solid liturgical commentary from a renowned scholar (he is a Catholic University liturgy professor) who also drew inspiration from a worshiping community in the Maryland parish where he lives and worships.

JUSTICE NOTES

The ecological crisis is a human crisis. People of color and the poor most frequently suffer the worst effects of the crisis, living near landfills, toxic waste sites, city incinerators and working as farm and factory laborers exposed to toxic chemicals. All around the world, the neighborhoods and villages of the poor suffer devastation from the effects of denuded hillsides, ravaged forests, depleted soils, and polluted waters. Their "underdeveloped" countries are forced to take nuclear waste from "developed" nations and their peoples are displaced in business deals to pay off mounting national debts.

---- Sharon Theresa Zaynac

CHRISTMAS CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

The holiday season is particularly difficult for people on death row. Many of them have been abandoned by friends and family and seldom get visits. Some never have a visitor. I invite you to write a Christmas card to one or all of the inmates listed below. Let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Iziah B arden #0491889 (On death row since 11/12/99)
- Abner Nicholson #0670167 (11/18/99)
- Andre L. Fletcher #0130628 (2/ 01/99)
- Ronald Valentine #0592535 (2/01/00)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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