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The semi-penitential spirit of Advent is broken by this Third Sunday, also called Gaudete Sunday, the message of which is to rejoice. *Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, Rejoice!* These words come to us this morning from the introit and is signified to us by having lit the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath and the use of rose-colored vestments and paraments at Mass. Today's message to rejoice is a timely reminder for us as we draw near to Christmas, where we will hear the word rejoice again through the lessons for Christmastide and in many Christmas Carols. However, we may be surprised to learn the biblical definition for rejoice is not to be exuberantly happy, pleased, or even just excited. The biblical definition for rejoice is to *exult with exceedingly great joy*, or to be *glad with exceedingly great joy*. It means to revel in joy - an emotion that is far greater than happiness that the world cannot take away, and which is not dependent upon our emotions, successes, or failures because it is rooted in faith, hope, and love.

Earthly joys or pleasures eventually fade away, just as a child eventually loses interest in a coveted Christmas present. But the joy that never fades away is the joy of Christian hope. Sorrow cannot erode it, time cannot carry it away, it is the joy of eternal life, and the joy of heaven. Only the believer, the Christian, can have true joy. Such joy cannot be derived from a moment of sin or shallow success; it is much deeper and cannot be taken away by time, chance, mishap or by death. And while we may find ways to preserve some of the simple joys of life, this true eternal joy outshines them all. Yet we must not forget that God often uses wholesome earthly joys to whet our appetite for the greater joy that will lead us to heaven. To this end, C. S. Lewis in his book Letters to Malcolm writes, *Dance and game are frivolous, unimportant down here; for 'down here' is not their natural place. Here, they are a moment's rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is likeliest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.* For it is only in the humble birth of the Son of God that the joy of heaven, and even some passing joys have some hope of not disappearing like shadows.

Joy is the serious business of heaven, and it is the serious business of the Christian. We are called to *rejoice in the Lord always*, for Joy is the serious business of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This is also the lesson from this morning's strange Gospel lesson. Saint John the Baptist, the prophet of the Lord sends his disciples to ask Jesus if He is the promised Messiah. And Jesus in a roundabout way says yes. He told John's disciples, *go and show John again those things which ye do*

*hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them; and blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.* Jesus says this not to reproach St. John who was suffering in prison at that moment for prophesying the coming of the Lord, but so that John might have joy because God's salvation had arrived. Our Lord did turn to the crowd that had gathered, the many who had followed John the Baptist and heard his preaching and reproached them that they had gone out to see St. John the Baptist because he was a spectacle and an unusual prophet, and not because he was the bearer of the good news of heaven, and of glad tidings of joy.

St. John the Baptist himself is, of course, an unusual character. Even for us today, it is hard to see past the wild man of the wilderness wearing a hair shirt made from camel's hair, a rough leather belt, who ate locusts and wild honey. St. John's asceticism and austerity and his constant message to *repent for the Lord is near* is hard to hear and we close our ears to the greater message of St. John the Baptist. What motivated St. John the Baptist to proclaim the message of the coming of God's kingdom was joy rooted in faith and hope. His zeal for God's law was tempered by joy, and by continually rejoicing in the coming Kingdom of Heaven, his suffering in his prison cell and even his death sentence were bearable. St. John knew real joy, the true joy that comes from faith and hope in God's salvation and the promise of heaven, which set him apart and singled him out as a radical follower of our Lord.

This Advent we await the celebration of the birth of Christ in a humble manger in Bethlehem and we prepare ourselves also for His coming again in power and glory. We prepare to meet our judge whose word is life and even though we are mere sinful mortals, yet we are told to *rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!* For the little child born in a manger in the backwater town of Bethlehem brings to us the transforming joy of heaven. Amen.