

[Zeph. 3:14-18a; Is 12:2-6; Phil. 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18]

'Tis the season to be jolly, as the song goes. But even if the jolly gene has managed to escape you, or this particular season finds you with plenty of specific reasons not to be happy, there is cause for rejoicing here, as the Bible tells us. In fact, we Christians are called to the vocation of joy, a fruit of the Holy Spirit not dependent on our present circumstances or our emotional frame of mind.

Maybe that's why I am wearing an unusually upbeat color like "manly rose," and why the Church year includes a day called Gaudete Sunday, which means "rejoice." We are called to rejoice, even though it's not Christmas yet. We are invited to joy, even though the fulfillment of our hope is yet to be realized. Without seeing, we believe. Without holding it in our hands, we already claim what has been promised.

The Third Sunday of Advent focuses our attention on the spirit of joyfulness, because this is an essential mark of true faith in Christ. All of the readings are full of joy and the thrill of happy expectation. In the Gospel reading, John the Baptizer preaches good news to the people, and they are filled with joyful anticipation for whatever God is about to do.

Do you know that joy is a ministry? It's an important way to share the faith. We all have a calling to do this ministry wherever there is misery and hopelessness. Joy is different from happiness. Joy is a deep-seeded virtue; being happy is a passing human emotion.

In his encyclical, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis became the first pope in history to use in an official papal document the word, "Sourpuss." The literal word in the original Spanish was "*cara de viangre*," or "vinegar face;" the eventual Latin translation became "*vultus trux*" or "grim faced." He reminded us that Christians who truly possess the joy of the Gospel should not always look like they just came back from a funeral!

Let's look at how John fulfilled this ministry of joy. We might think he was anything but joyful in his robe of scratchy camels' hair and his fiery sermons about repenting from sin. But look closer. His ministry prepared people's hearts to receive Jesus.

Having faith means trusting God, which means resting in hope, which produces joy. When you or someone you know is lacking joy, maybe it's because Jesus has not yet been invited fully into the situation that's been stealing the joy.

It might be too early in the grieving process, which is healthy and normal, or it might be a lack of faith, which needs nurturing.

Whenever my mom would meet with my dad's sister, whom we affectionately named, "Mean Auntie Jean," it was not a social call, it was a contest of "Can You Top This," as each listed their litanies of illness and tragedy!

The ability to experience the joy of faith comes from turning to the love of God and receiving His comfort in the midst of hardships. It also arises from getting to know the joyful side of Jesus and the joyful purposes behind all of His teachings. Jesus preaches going the extra mile, loving our enemies, and doing good to those who cause us hardships, none of which is fun. What we need to discover and then share with others is that holy living, although not always fun, is what unites us to the joyful love of Jesus and the joyful purposes of everything He preached. Remember, even going to the cross produces joyful results.

The good news is: Jesus didn't just tell us HOW to be holy, He gave us the *power* to be holy: He gave us His Holy Spirit. And when others see the Holy Spirit's activity in us, if they know that Jesus is the reason for our joy, they are evangelized by our faith!

These ideas are foreign to our culture. Why should we be happy about something we don't have? If what we long for has not arrived, how can we celebrate it? The kind of joy to which Christians are invited is not the sort that comes when the reward has already been achieved and there is nothing left to wait for. We are the people who "wait in joyful hope," as we say at every Mass. The time of anticipation is part of the season of joy, because our faith makes us confident that God's promises are as good as accomplished.

It is the nature of being human that we are never quite at home in our world. There is always something missing even in the most perfect day, and something still to be wished for in the most ideal season of our lives. As children, we long to be old enough, and we spend adulthood wishing we were younger.

We may be strong and healthy, but we wish for love. When we have love, we wish for more security. When we have security, we may want more time and freedom to enjoy it. When we finally have freedom, our health may begin to fail or those we love may have moved beyond us. Being human means we rarely if ever can gather up all the fragments of our longing and hold them in one place for more than a moment.

These are the kinds of people coming here for Christmas. These are the folks that you will greet and welcome as greeters.

I again invite you to prayerfully consider signing up in the back of the church by the St. Martin de Porres statue to be a one-time greeter at our Christmas Masses. To welcome, greet and give directions to our visitors and guests. After Mass, to hand them a free gift book and thank-you card for their presence and participation. That's why we can appreciate the idea of celebrating a day that is almost here, a reality that is almost close enough to touch. We know that this world, with all of its remarkable beauty and wonder and promise, cannot give us everything we hope for.

Life is too short, and too fragile, to deliver every desire to our door. Even the happiest person on the planet right now is only "almost home" to his or her deepest fulfillment. Because a really perfect day would never end, and its finality reminds us that suffering and death are always right around the corner.

In the time of John, the people were filled with expectation and asking in their hearts if He is the Christ. He was a great prophet and preacher, of that they had no doubt. And He gave them practical moral advice about how to live: to be generous with what they had, honest in their dealings with each other, and content with their material wealth. But was He the answer to the question in their hearts? Would He put the waiting of many generations to rest at last?

John replied that there was more to come, specifically that One mightier than he was coming who could bring more to the people than John himself could dream of. We will know we have arrived, it seems, when the clock stops ticking and the great advent of human history is finally over.

Where does joy live in you? Where does joy live in you?

Is it easy for you, even in your brokenness, imperfection and sinfulness, to imagine the Lord God rejoicing over you with gladness? Do you believe that God rejoices over you with gladness?

Rejoice and be glad, for our Lord and Messiah is coming soon! AMEN!