

Isaiah 35

1 Cor. 4:1-5

Matthew 11:2-10

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Today we celebrate the Third Sunday in Advent, which we commonly call Rose Sunday, or Gaudete Sunday. We have lit the rose-colored candle, and we are reminded that it's not just real men who can and do wear pink, but real Anglo-Catholics too. But this year, the Third Sunday in Advent is unique, not just because the old and new themes of Advent, of Joy and Heaven align for one week, but because this year, today is the last true Sunday of Advent. It is fitting in a way though, that we end this Advent's hurried rush to Christmas with the themes of Joy and Heaven. This Advent has done its best to give us a sense of the Scripture's warning, *watch ye, for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at evening, or at morning, or at midnight, lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping*. With the expected rush of the coming week, we might find it difficult to not be tempted to be anxious, to fret that Christmas seems to be coming faster this year. Amid all of this, amid all the activities, celebrations, and busyness, God wants us to rejoice, to be joyful!

Archbishop Fulton Sheen, the famous Catholic television Evangelist of the 1950's and 1960's writes about the differences between earthly happiness, pleasure, and the Joy God wants us to have, he says simply, *Joy is not the same as pleasure or happiness. A wicked and evil man may have pleasure, while any ordinary mortal is capable of being happy. Pleasure generally comes from things, and always through the senses; happiness comes from humans through fellowship. Joy comes from loving God and neighbor. Pleasure is quick and violent, like a flash of lightning. Joy is steady and abiding, like a fixed star. Pleasure depends on external circumstances, such as money, food, travel, [but] Joy is independent of them, for it comes from a good conscience and love of God.*

We find the difference between joy and pleasure again in the Gospel for today. This morning's Gospel begins on death row. John the Baptist is in prison, bound in a desolate fortress on the far side of the dead sea, awaiting his execution for speaking out against the adultery of the king. For a moment it seems that the message of heavenly joy will be extinguished by earthly pleasure and happiness. Interestingly, St. John the Baptist is considered the patron saint of spiritual joy. After all, he did leap in his mother's womb at the voice of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the presence of the unborn Christ Child. But a man who then lived in the desert,

in wilderness places, eating locusts, and dressed in only rough camel fur, would probably not be an obvious choice for a patron of spiritual joy. We find also that this patron of joy even struggled with his own doubts. The last message, the last question of a man on death row was to send messengers to Jesus to ask him *art thou He that should come, or do we look for another?* Had all his baptizing and preaching been in vain? Jesus comforts John the Baptist, He casts away the clouds of doubt and confirms his joy by telling him, *yes, I am, see the miracles I do, but most importantly the Gospel is preached to all people.* He tells John the Baptist that his life and ministry have not been in vain. The message of heaven will prevail and overtake the world. Then Jesus turns to the crowd in front of Him, many of whom had gone to see and hear St. John the Baptist preach and baptize. But Jesus reveals that many of them had followed John the Baptist and were sitting before Him even today out of mere pleasure or curiosity, as one might follow an entertainer, or go to the theater. They did not go to St. John out of their love for God. This is what Jesus is addressing when He asks the crowds *What came ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment?* Jesus rather playfully points out to them that they came only to see a spectacle.

There were plenty of signs and wonders to be had though. Notice the miracles Jesus lists; *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them.* Jesus does not list superficial miracles, these are not mere parlor tricks, the miracles of Jesus were so numerous and prolific that many in the crowd might have known someone whose life was changed forever after an encounter with Jesus. There was no denying to any of them, that this Jesus was a wonder worker. But what made His miracles so startling was that the miracles that Jesus worked restored life, and the miracles of Jesus gave joy instead of fleeting happiness, or pleasure. And all of this was foretold by the prophet Isaiah, this is the reference that someone like St. John was sure to catch. But according to the prophecy of Isaiah, these wonderful miracles, even though they brought joy, was only a sign of something far greater which had come.

Isaiah prophesies, that with the coming of Christ, *The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad...and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose...behold your God will come and save you...and the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water.* God promises not just healing, not just joy, but complete transformation. A transformation so complete that *the ransomed of the Lord, Jew and Gentile, those once regarded as clean and unclean, those who were once lame, leprous, blind, and sick, shall return, and come to*

Zion, the heavenly Zion, with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. But this is not something far off, only to be experienced after death, because this has all been accomplished through Jesus Christ it can be experienced today. Joy is the gift that God wants to give us this year for Christmas; it is the gift God wants to give us today. But we must remember, as Fulton Sheen writes, that earthly happiness and pleasure, which we may experience this Christmas season is not joy. Neither can true joy be easily lost, it is not dependent on our circumstances or situations, as we learn through St. John the Baptist. But joy is also not puritanical. Earthly happiness and pleasure can whet an appetite for something far greater and deeper, for experiencing the joy of heaven here below. We all experience this on some level at this time of year. We wonder if there is anything we can do to make the happiness of Christmas last year-round, we make the concerted effort to shake the December 26th blues.

Experiencing heaven on earth, the true Joy of Christmas, is to focus on Jesus Christ, what He has done for us, what He wants from us, what He promises us. Having a realistic assessment of ourselves, and knowing Jesus are two ways to true Joy and heaven on earth. Heaven on earth is looking at ourselves as God looks at us. Heaven on earth is realizing that we must amend our lives if we ever want to understand the true meaning of Christmas. This means remembering that the calling which Zacharias prophesied over his son, John the Baptist, which we recite every morning at Morning Prayer, is also our calling, *thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways: To give knowledge of salvation unto his people for the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us; To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet in the way of peace.*