

Advent 3C

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Keep on Rejoicing

One of my fondest childhood memories occurred in of all places the hospital. I was twelve, in the midst of those awkward preteen years, and recovering from yet another surgery. I remember that it seemed a particularly difficult time because it was September and my brothers and friends were all starting back to school while I was stuck in the hospital. My mother and aunt decided to throw a party right there in my hospital room. The following Saturday was the Miss America Pageant and they thought it would be fun to invite people to watch it with us. "What better excuse to have a party," they said! I should have anticipated something like this from my mother and her older sister who were known for coming up with crazy ideas together.

All week long the two of them plotted and planned while I laughed and rolled my eyes at them like any good preteen. The evening arrived and soon my little room was packed with other children from my wing, their family members, the nurses on duty that night and even a doctor, who was on-call. We had popcorn and candy. Pizza was even delivered. Remember, this was back in the day when delivery pizza was a new concept. I think the delivery guy was more surprised than all of us to be bringing pizza into the hospital. My mother and aunt somehow managed to smuggle in beer for some of the adults. We all

picked our favorite contestant and at the end of the night the one who had chosen the new Miss America received a prize!

My mother and aunt had pulled it off. It was certainly one of the best and most memorable parties ever thrown on my behalf. I learned an important life lesson that evening. I learned that in spite of the circumstances of our lives we can be overwhelmed by joy. E. Stanley Jones writes, "There is something deeper than happiness, and that is joy. 'Happiness is the world's word, 'joy' is the Christian's word. The New Testament does not use the word 'happiness' or promise it-it uses the word 'joy'. And for a reason...Our faith offers joy in the midst of happenings which makes people with that faith unhappy...Take what you have and make something out of it," Jones continues. Learn to live *in spite of*." Or as the great theologian Karl Barth put it, "Joy is a defiant nevertheless."

We hear that defiant nevertheless echoed throughout our scripture passages today. Whether it is Zephaniah and Isaiah crying out to the people of Israel or Paul exhorting the church in Philippi, each of these men has the audacity to tell their audiences to rejoice! If we did not know the circumstances in which each of these men and their audiences were living we would not think twice about their words. Zephaniah and Isaiah are prophets preaching to a people who literally have lost their way, feel forsaken by their God and have found themselves in that wilderness place of exile. "Rejoice," they proclaim. "Your wilderness days will soon be coming to an end. Your God will not forsake you any longer." In spite of the dark, wilderness places in which they find themselves, these prophets are calling their people to be joyful.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul invokes the words *joy* and *rejoice* sixteen times. Sixteen times in four chapters. What is so remarkable about Paul's emphatic and continuous call for rejoicing is that he writes these words chained in prison knowing that he faces impending death for his preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The circumstances of the church to which he is writing are challenging, as well. Few in number, the Philippians are believers of a very unpopular religion. They are seen as a despised minority that is not to be trusted. If that wasn't their only issue at hand, among themselves they had broken into factions which could have destroyed this young, fledgling church. Paul's major concern in this letter is their disagreement. They are a community filled with doubt and fear, facing discord from within and opposition from without.

Their future seems uncertain and Paul tells them over and over again to rejoice. What is there to rejoice about? The key to Paul's refrain is that he says to the Philippians to rejoice **in the Lord** and to rejoice **always**. The secret to joy Paul tells the Philippians and us is not to look to our own circumstances, but to look to our Lord. We can rejoice because we are the Lord's. We belong to God through Jesus. Through the very dark, wilderness places of our lives God promises to be with us in Jesus. This is the hope we cling to in this season of Advent. And this is the gift we prepare to celebrate in the Incarnation.

The Diocese of Mississippi put together a video in the aftermath of Katrina to show the devastation which had occurred in their communities and among their parishes. In the video is a scene of a parish celebrating the Holy Eucharist the Sunday after the hurricane had struck the Gulf Coast. On a concrete slab where

the church had stood only days before the congregation now gathered. There were no pews or prayer books, no beautiful stained glass windows, no organ or altar. Only shattered fragments of their former space lay amid the debris which the fierce winds and waters had left behind in its wake. There among the devastation people and priest lifted up their voices together in praise and thanksgiving to their God, proclaiming a “defiant nevertheless”.

The very same refrain that Paul had offered to the church in Philippi and Zephaniah and Isaiah had offered to the Hebrew people resounded among those Episcopalians on the Gulf Coast. We gather here together on this third Sunday in Advent in spite of the scary and anxious-ridden circumstances of our lives. In the midst of our own devastation and debris, we offer praise and thanksgiving to our Lord. We share in the Eucharistic feast, believing that in this meal our hope is restored and our faith is renewed. While we sit here and continue to wait as Advent people, waiting for God to come among us again and to lead us out of the wilderness into a new promised land, may we take to heart the message of Paul and Zephaniah and Isaiah who urge us to keep on rejoicing. With courage and confidence may we continue to proclaim that *defiant nevertheless*. “Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice.”

