

The Third Sunday of Advent
Leave-Taking for St. Peter's, Glenside
The Rev. Emily Richards
December 12, 2021

Rejoice Always!

So, here we are. The day has arrived to mark the ending of our pastoral relationship and to give thanks for the marvelous journey we've been on together. In the church calendar the Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called "Gaudete" or "Rejoice" Sunday because it's a day when we anticipate and celebrate delight — God's delight in us, and our delight in God and God's promises for us. The quieter and more solemn color of blue of our Advent wreath candles is replaced this day in favor of a cheery rose color. As Christians around the world reflect on the significance of Jesus's once and future arrival, we pause to remember the heart of the Good News of God's saving love in the birth of God's Son. Good news that is grounded in great joy.

With the nudge of the Holy Spirit, I recently came across the reflection I wrote in my application thirteen years ago when I put my name in as a candidate for your Rector's search process. I even quoted the words we heard from St. Paul this morning. Here's some of what I said: "I find it a delight for a parish to highlight that it enjoys celebrating together. The work of the Gospel is indeed serious business, but it is also joyful business. As God's people we are called to weep together and laugh together, to share fully in each other's journeys. Joy is an often-underdeveloped gift of the Christian life. The fact that you clearly have a good time being together I would enjoy serving and sharing in God's work." All these years later and nothing could be truer about this community. One of the beautiful charisms of this parish is your capacity to rejoice always.

The Christian understanding of joy is not some pollyannaish, forced cheerfulness that our culture often demands at this time of year. We hear from our ancestors Zephaniah and Paul a completely different approach to joy, one that does not include denial or sentimentality. Zephaniah writes to his people during a time of terrible spiritual and political corruption, perpetrated by the leaders who are supposed to care for the most

vulnerable in society. His call to joy is combined with his call to repentance and lament, and his confidence that God will not forsake the cries of the suffering. God will come to bring justice and peace among the oppressed. St. Paul exhorts the Church in Philippi to rejoice always, as he sits in prison. It is helpful to remember that he once caused great violence and suffering upon Christians. Now a Christian himself he is rejected, beaten, and awaiting his own execution.

Paul's words to the Philippians are not about feeling good. The joy he writes about is not dependent upon the circumstances of our lives. It is however about cultivating a deep and abiding hope that amid the darkness of our lives and world all things will be well. It is what the great Theologian Karl Barth living in the shadow of the Third Reich describes as "the defiant nevertheless." Or as Debbie Thomas reflects in her weekly lectionary essay, "Joy requires us to sidestep sentimentality and cynicism alike. It requires that we hold onto two realities at once: the reality of the world's brokenness in one hand, and the reality of God's love in the other. Joy is what happens when we daily live into the belief that God can and will bridge the gap between the world we long for and the world we see before our eyes. It is a posture, an orientation, a practice. A willingness to sit gently but persistently in the tension of the 'not yet,' trusting that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in that in-between place for as long as it takes."

Amid a global pandemic, amid sickness and suffering, dislocated hips, amid personal and communal loss, the loss of our loved ones, the loss of our church friends, the loss even of our church home, we have continued to rejoice. What we have proclaimed over the years together is not some superficial, sentimental cheerfulness, but a "defiant nevertheless." Now I can't leave you without quoting Saint Nadia one last time. So, here goes. She writes, "What is a call to joy but a call home? A call home to the garden of this God whose desire to be known is so much more powerful than our desire to be right. Undeterred, our God still uses any means necessary to be known by us: God speaks through prophets, slips into skin and walks among us in Jesus, woos us in bread and wine, surprises us in the strange and the stranger, enters our ears in the words of life, and transforms us into a people of joy, a people of singing hills and clapping trees."

During the Advent season, we are invited to renew our trust in the audacious promise at the heart of all Christian hope and joy - the promise the angel made to young Mary, awed by the announcement that she was to be the mother of God's child: Nothing will be impossible with God. What I will cherish the most from our shared ministry and will take with me to St. Thomas' is the belief that nothing, nothing at all, neither sickness, nor suffering, nor darkness, nor loss, not even death itself can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. My prayer for you, my beloved friends, as you begin a season of transition, your very own holy in-between-place is that you too will cling to this Advent hope while grounded in Advent joy. God does what we cannot do. God draws near with surprising grace to bring light out of darkness. God fills the silence of our hearts with the music of angels and tells us there is nothing to fear.

As our Bishop said in his pastoral letter to you, God is already preparing your new Rector for your journey together. I can't wait to see what you will do with them in the name of the loving, liberating and life-giving God. I will never stop believing in this community. I will never stop loving you. So even amid the tears and the heartfelt goodbyes, let us rejoice!

For what was

and the people proclaim thanks be to God!

For what is

and the people proclaim thanks be to God!

For what will be

and the people proclaim thanks be to God!

Amen.