

3rd Sunday of Advent - December 13, 2015

If the prophet Jeremiah speaks of Justice and the prophet Baruch speaks of how Mercy is the companion to Justice, then the prophet Zephaniah is the prophet of Joy. Joy is not necessarily happiness. We know that all too well. They are not the same thing. Happiness is a feeling and, with all feelings, can come and go, be here today and gone tomorrow, like kids who unwrap gifts and then the next day, gifts are no longer the source of happiness. But Joy is something different. It is something that predures, that endures, that lasts, it is that spirit which sustains and lifts us up right in the middle of unhappy times. Joy is that quality of life, that vision of creation that the loving hand of God is in all things and providing for all God's creatures, even during times of loneliness and boredom, misery, or despair.

Joy, therefore, shines forth in a people of faith who believe in the resurrection of Christ, who know the power of God in Christ to transform even death into new life. Therefore, Joy flows from the gift of the Risen Christ, which is the gift of His Spirit, and in fact, the Church names one of the Fruits of the Spirit as Joy itself. One of the signs of the Holy Spirit working in our lives is Joy itself.

So during this Advent season, as we prepare to receive more fully the Son of God into those parts of our lives where perhaps we have not given Him entrance before, we do so by recognizing the lies we live by that can suck Joy right out of our life. Because Jesus is the Savior, the One who comes to set us free from the lies that keep us in darkness, He wants to bring us the fullness of His Joy. We can only receive that gift and live out that gift if we first bring into the light the lies that keep us in darkness.

One of the lies we live by in our culture is that we are created to possess things and the more things we possess, the more joy-filled we'll be. We are led to believe that if I can hold in my hand this thing—the newest best gadget, a new car, a new house, whatever it may be—then I will be full of Joy. And this lie, which the tempter tempts us to live by therefore leads us to take a bite out of the fruit, a deadly fruit, called envy, which means we look at what other people have and we never notice all the gifts we have. We want or desire what that person has, never grateful for all that we have been given. Envy sucks Joy right out of one's life.

Another lie we live by: If I can possess this person, if I can have a relationship with this particular person, they will satisfy all my needs, and then I will know Joy. This lie leads to the deadly fruit, the deadly sin of jealousy—a sin that blinds us to the truth that no one is the possession of anyone else. Actually, God has created every single human being for Himself, not to be possessed or owned by another human being, but ultimately as someone made to return to the One who made them, who created them, who belongs to Him, the Creator of All. You know, when we try to hold on to another person as “mine”, try to limit their freedom, what happens is jealousy displaces all the Joy that resides in a relationship with another.

So the Savior of the World, the One who is constantly coming into the world and trying to break into our lives, He wants to set us free from the lies we live by. As the Light of the World, He also sheds light on the darkness of language that keeps us bound up, keeps us really limited in our Joy—language like “my” or “mine”—that kind of language has the capacity to drain us of Joy itself. Because the Redeemer of the World, the One whose birth fills the Angels and Christmas with Joy—resounding Joy—teaches us that our Heavenly Father did not create us to possess things or to possess others but created us to be possessed by Joy, to be possessed by the One who is Joy.

This is why Saint Paul can speak those powerful words that some people scratch their head at, you know? “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Always? You’ve got to be kidding me! But notice the key words: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” It’s only in this ongoing relationship between us and the Savior of the World, allowing Him to come to us and set us free from the lies we live by, that we can truly be filled with Joy. And have you ever noticed that the most joyful people to walk the face of the earth are the ones who have surrendered themselves completely to the Lord of Joy?

Think about Francis of Assisi, an Italian who lived way back in the 13th century, who literally gave everything his father had given him back to his father and embraced Lady Poverty and is recognized as perhaps the most joyful person to ever walk the face of the earth, who found delight in the gifts of God each day, the simple gifts that many don’t notice: Brother Sun giving him warmth, Sister Moon lighting the way in the dark of night, the creatures of God who brought him much Joy, and the relationships he had with his brothers and others that sustained him throughout his life.

Or, think of Mother Theresa who went and left everything she knew behind to go to the poorest place on earth, the slums of Calcutta, who served the poorest of the poor there, who on her last visit to the United States—I can still remember seeing her face on T.V.—this old woman bent over by age and arthritis. If you looked in her face—radiated Joy, just was permeated with Joy. This woman who had surrendered her entire life to the Lord of Joy and had surrendered to Him present in his broken body, the poor whom she reached out to touch in Joy and whom she recognized was His presence in her midst.

Both Francis of Assisi and Theresa of Calcutta teach us the way to Joy. The way to encounter the source of Joy, and to be nourished by Joy, is to love Christ Jesus, to surrender to Him, and to especially allow Him to come to us, present in the poor.

It’s always fascinating to me to listen to the stories of American youth who go off to third world countries to serve the poor on mission trips. They come back and one of the first things I hear them say is they are just blown away by the joyful spirit of the people they went to serve and who have nothing compared to all that we have materially, but who have everything because they recognize each day that the hand of the Lord feeds them and that they have to trust that somehow the Lord will provide for all they need. It is out of this trust, this surrender to the Lord in His goodness that they are able to be full of gratitude for even the smallest of gifts, the tiniest of things.

So, what shall we do, we who have so much? What shall we do to rejoice always in the Lord? Saint John the Baptist, the one who prepares the way for the coming of the Lord, he tells us. It’s pretty simple. Someone’s hungry? Give him bread. Someone is in need of one of your cloaks and you have two of them? Give it away. In other words, to share what we have, to recognize it is a gift given to be given away. And in giving the gifts we have away to others who need them, to recognize that in fact we are receiving as we give the Lord who comes to us in His need, in the faces of the poor. And then Joy is multiplied! In the giving away of what we have, we are more ready to receive more gifts from the Lord and in the one who receives—gratitude for all that is given from the kindness of hearts that overflow in love.

You and I come here Sunday after Sunday to encounter the God who has made us for Joy and out of Joy, to encounter a God who rejoices in His people, a God who through His son Jesus Christ, has expressed His delight in all that He has made, especially in human beings created in His image, a God who comes to

us in this celebration and in the simplest of ways: a little bread, a sip of wine that we recognize as the greatest gift of all, the living presence of the Risen Lord, nourishing us, strengthening us, filling us with Joy, so that we might always be people of gratitude for even the smallest gifts. Because, people who are grateful, who are thankful, are people who are full of Joy. And, Joy is the surest sign of God's presence in the world.

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