

“Again I Will Say, Rejoice”
Luke 3:7-18; Philippians 4:4-7

The third Sunday in Advent has a special name in Latin, *Gaudete* (gow-DAE-tae), which means “Rejoice.” It also has a special candle in the Advent Wreath – the pink or rose colored one. This Sunday gets its name from the first word of the Introit used for Mass in Catholic churches. But ultimately it comes from our second reading for today from the Epistle to the Philippians where the Apostle Paul encourages his readers: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice.”

After hearing today’s Gospel reading from Luke, however, some might wonder whether John the Baptizer got the memo. He seems to be sounding a different note, calling those who had come down to the river to be baptized a “brood of vipers,” and informing them, ominously, that “the ax is lying at the root of the trees.” I don’t know about you, but that doesn’t sound particularly joyful to me!

John’s message is directed at people who thought of themselves as God’s people, much the way we do, in fact, as when at the end of the service after the benediction I say, “and all the people of God said...” and everyone says “Amen.” We like to think of ourselves that way. But John is telling the people that if they don’t shape up, God will find others. As a matter of fact, he says, God doesn’t even need people but could take stones and raise up children of Abraham, or in our case I guess, fine, proper replacement Presbyterians. (Given the nature of Presbyterian style worship, it might be hard to tell the difference!)

Yeah, I don’t think John knew that this was the Sunday in Advent when we are supposed to rejoice or he might have prepared something a little lighter, a little more up-beat. But then I don’t think John was particularly an up-beat, light-hearted kind of guy. He fell more into the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, who were something like the ghosts in Dickens’ *“A Christmas Carol,”* Jacob Marley and the others with their chains, their long white hair and boney fingers, whose job it was to scare the hell out of people.

John did his job well. He had even the cold-hearted, calculating tax collectors and tough soldiers trembling in their boots and promising to change their ways. John spoke of stones and an ax and fire, all of which must have been intimately familiar to him being a desert dweller, and he didn’t pull any punches. He said that if you had two coats you should give one away to someone who had none. (What would he say, I wonder, to people like us who have four, six, eight coats?) And if you had food you should do the same he said.

Luke tells us that the people were enthralled. They were “filled with expectation.” The air was charged. They didn’t care if John was a little grumpy because they sensed that something amazing was about to happen. They could feel it! And that is what Advent is all about. It is about that air of expectation – not because the biggest holiday of the year is just around the corner but because something powerful and spiritual, something inward is happening.

But the main admonition for this third Sunday of Advent comes not from John but from the Apostle Paul in our second reading for today who writes this: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Despite his reputation as a kind of uptight, converted Pharisee who had been eating too many mournful oats (oats grown by Presbyterian farmers in the Midwest), he was capable of a tenderness and warmth that is surprising. Never is this side of him more apparent than in his letter to the Philippians. He seems to have had a special place in his heart for the good folks down at the First Church of Philippi. Listen to these words at the start of his letter: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you....” and so on.

So we'll leave John the Baptist to his brooding and chafing and turn to the Apostle Paul on this third Sunday in Advent, for some words on the theme of rejoicing. It is not my intention this morning to add to the already considerable pressure that comes at this time of year to put on a happy face and to enter into the mood of the season. And there definitely is pressure. As someone has said, the North American culture sort of demands joy from us at this time of year. In this country one of our guaranteed inalienable rights is the "pursuit of happiness." (Of course it is the pursuit that is guaranteed, not the happiness.) And the pursuit can be a very exhausting enterprise, and never more so than at this time of year. It wears on people. A kind of weariness overtakes many of us at this time of year. Like the cartoon I saw once of a man in a prison cell talking to his cellmate: "This time of year," he says, "with the office parties and the family visits, and having to shop for everyone you know – I'm truly thankful that I'm inside."¹ So no. There is no pressure here to get in the holiday spirit. Rather, what this sermon is about is an invitation to look deeper, and to find something within.

In the early years of our country when the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville came to see what this new country was all about he had this observation to make: "In America...I have seen the freest and best educated of men (and) in the circumstances the happiest to be found in the world; yet it seemed to me that a cloud habitually hung on their brow, and they seemed serious and almost sad in their pleasure... because they never stop thinking of the good things they have not got."²

So both John and Paul are telling us to look for something deeper. Telling people to rejoice is not the same as telling people to have a "holly, jolly Christmas." They are quite different. One writer says this: "After love, joy is the uncommon quality most commonly associated with the Christian life."³ She quotes that great Puritan preacher of the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards, known mostly for his emphasis upon the wrath of God. When he proposed the signs that distinguish true religious experience from the counterfeit he said that joy was "a dead giveaway that God was present in someone's life."

The canonization process in the Catholic Church requires evidence of joy in a person's life, for as one person put it: "there is no such thing as a sad saint." The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich referred to joy as a quality of life that we experience when we are really ourselves. "Joy is nothing else than the awareness of our being fulfilled in our true being, in our personal center." Huston Smith, who is a renowned expert on world religions and who taught at SU for some years before retiring in 1983 says of this passage in Philippians: "Perhaps *radiance* would be a better word. *Radiance* is hardly the word used to characterize the average religious life, but no other word fits as well the life of (those) early Christians."⁴

Radiance! Rejoicing! I don't know. Can we manage it? It is a tall order. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning I find that I have a tune running through my head, often one that comes out of the blue. One morning this last week I woke up with a tune from my childhood, one we sang in Sunday School. Maybe some of you know it. It goes like this:

Climb, climb up Sunshine Mountain, heavenly breezes blow.
Climb, climb up Sunshine Mountain, faces all aglow.
Turn, turn from sin and doubting, look to God on high,
Climb, climb up Sunshine Mountain, you and I.

I don't know where that came from. Diane was just waking up when I sang it for her along with the hand motions that go with it, which I know she appreciated! It's a silly song, really. But maybe it's not such a bad song for the third Sunday in Advent. It's got a little John the Baptizer with line about turning from sin and doubting. And it's got a lot of the Apostle Paul in there.

And when you think about it, Sunshine Mountain doesn't sound like such a bad place to hang out. At least it sounds better than the overcast Valley of Gloom, or the Slough of Despond in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. But climbing Sunshine Mountain can be a bit of a struggle at times. Sometimes we have to claw our way up that mountain. There are so many forces at work to drag us down. And as you climb, the air gets thinner, and the climb gets steeper.

In 2004, just after Diane had finished chemotherapy from her first breast cancer and was beginning to get a little strength back, we drove down to the Catskills on Columbus Day, stayed overnight in the tiniest room either of us had ever slept in, and the next morning we drove around looking for a mountain to climb. We came to a trail head where a lot of cars were parked and got out. Would this be too much for Diane in her weakened state? We asked a man who was there how hard the climb was and he said it was manageable. So we started up. Later we found out that it was rated as a challenging climb. All in all it was a vertical rise of 1,000 feet, and it was pretty rocky and steep in a lot of places. Several times Diane said she didn't think she could go any further but I kept pushing her (sometimes pulling her) and we made it to the top. And what can I say, it was Sunshine Mountain! The view from the top was spectacular! The sun was shining, the trees in the forest that we could see for several miles around were near their peak of color. And we had cell phone reception and called our kids and grandkids to tell them that we had made it to the top of a mountain.

This fall we flew to Colorado to see our son. On the way back we had a little time in the Denver airport and stopped in an interesting, new agey shop with pottery from Peru, Native American items and meditative music. In the book section I saw a book by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh entitled, simply, *Happiness*. I had heard about this monk, seen quotes by him, but had never read anything by him so I bought it. It is filled with simple meditative practices that one can do while one goes about the daily activities of walking, sitting, working, eating, talking. It is, he says, about being mindful (a favorite Buddhist word), about being aware when we are walking that we are walking, and when we are sitting that we are sitting. It is about being present in the moment. But something he said in the introduction caught my eye. He said, "*Life is full of suffering. If we don't have enough happiness on reserve, we have no means to take care of our despair.*" Happiness on reserve! I like that thought. I don't think that when the Apostle Paul spoke of rejoicing that he meant something that is precisely synonymous with happiness, but it's not all that far away either.

So be kind to yourself this season. Relax a little. Take the pressure off. If the decorations in the house don't turn out looking like the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*, or if the Christmas meal isn't worthy of Martha Stewart, or if you don't find the absolutely perfect gift for everyone on your list, it's ok. Relax. Lower your expectations a bit. Enjoy the season. The advice from a counseling center seems pretty good: "Expect the holidays to be pleasant but not marvelous." Instead of trying for perfection this year, work instead on building up that reserve of happiness. Work on climbing Sunshine Mountain, one step at a time.

¹ The New Yorker, 12/15/03

² Quoted in *The Cry for Myth*, Rollo May

³ Doris Donnelly, *Weavings*, Nov./Dec. '93

⁴ *The Soul of Christianity*, Huston Smith, *The Christian Century*, 10/4/05