

The Rev. Luke Selles  
Third Sunday of Advent, Year C  
Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields  
15 December 2024

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is near.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, as we lit the third candle in our Advent Wreath, we prayed and reflected on Joy. And, as you’ve likely noticed, that candle, like our liturgical color this Sunday, has changed from blue to pink. What’s going on here?

This tradition, which arose in Western Christianity, is a remnant of an early tradition in which Advent began at the Feast of St. Martin (our very own saint) on November 12th and lasted through Christmas Day, December 25th. This seven week long season of penitence, mirroring Lent’s time of preparation for the feast of Easter, had a different name: “St. Martin’s Fast.”

Last Sunday during the 9AM service, we were visited by Nicholas of Myra, who is the Christian Bishop and Saint behind the figure known as “Santa Claus” – who himself is a mash-up of different largely European enculturated celebrations of St. Nicholas’ Feast Day. Saint Nicholas told us his story and the great acts of almsgiving he did in secret, so as not to draw attention to himself or potentially humiliate those who received his gifts. His almsgiving was his way of spending his inheritance in order to embrace a life of complete devotion to the Church. A world far removed from our culture’s stories of “Santa Claus.”

The remembrance of St. Nicholas during the fast – or season of repentance, as well as moderation, acts of charity, and prayer – that we now know as Advent – was a fitting way of preparing for God’s ultimate gift – God’s self.

And so during this time of fasting, this Sunday became significant as a reprieve – named “Gaudete,” in reference to the first word of that Latin Mass – “Rejoice,” taken from our passage from Philippians today. While not a complete end to the Fast, this Sunday was a brief rest in recognition that God’s Incarnation, Christ’s Birth, was almost

there – a reason to rejoice – even in the midst of the darkest, coldest, and leanest days of the year.

In St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, he cites his suffering itself as a source of joy. But the suffering he's talking about is his persecution for the sake of the Gospel. Paul, like Jeremiah, who I talked about two weeks ago, is in jail while he's writing this letter. This would seem like a failure, but, as we learn in Acts chapter 16, Paul, when he was in Philippi for the first time, was thrown in jail – and yet he converted his jailer. So, Paul speaks frankly about his weaknesses and failures in all his letters and in this letter to the Philippians, because through them he is able to testify to God's grace, to the Holy Spirit's work in and through him in whatever circumstance he was in. And so, leading up to this passage, as he addresses a persecuted Church and faithful members who disagree and are quarreling with each other, he advises and teaches them to "Rejoice."

What does this mean? Is he talking about an emotion? In the Greek, the word translated here as "Rejoice," is composed of the words for "joy" or "delight" and "favor" or "grace." To rejoice then is the proper response to God's grace, or God's meeting us in unexpected places and faces, in water, bread and wine, in the ordinary and commonplace. And so it really shouldn't be a surprise to us that God's ultimate act of Grace and Love, God's giving of God's self, came to us in the most commonplace, and yet the most miraculous: a baby.

So to rejoice then is not about forced cheer or jolliness. It has nothing to do with any external circumstance and does not preclude sadness or even deep, deep sorrow, which makes sense for a people who worship a crucified and resurrected God. You may have noticed in our reading from Zephaniah that we are not rejoicing alone – God rejoices in and with and through and over us. So, Joy is not really an emotion – rather, it is communion, communion with God. This is what John the Baptist prophesied and Paul is teaching us, the Church; to rejoice in the Lord always: to commune with God in prayer, thanksgiving, petition – for God is near, and no matter where we are or what we have done, God promises to give us God's self. Amen.