

3rd Sunday Advent Year “C”

December 12-13, 2015 (515p, 800a, 1000a) *Rejoice in the Lord always*

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-18a; 1 Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

St. Paul's moving letter to the faithful at Philippi was written while he was in a prison somewhere- indeed he was in danger of death. Although under guard for preaching Christ, Paul is still able to say, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” He was rejoicing at the continuing progress of the Gospel. While technically the verb could also be translated “good-bye” or “farewell,” scholars of ancient Greek letters maintain that it was never used in this way. The addition of “always” is more evidence for its primary meaning of “rejoice.”¹

The fact that it is written from prison makes it a little more difficult to dismiss as the overly optimistic and naïve emotions of someone passionate for the Gospel. These words are based in his real and lived experience of the Cross, an impending future that is uncertain at best. It is quite likely that Paul knew he would die. So how could he be saying, “Rejoice”? Rejoice about what, about whom?

St. Paul could rejoice because, despite all that was swirling around him, the peace of his soul remained intact because he knew the source of his peace could never be taken away from him.

Zephaniah prophesied in the 7th century before Christ at a time when belief in one God had in large part been replaced by pagan idols. Yet in the midst of this Zephaniah is able to predict that despite her sins, Zion (understand by this Jerusalem) will yet have cause to rejoice, she will sing for joy. But this was not brought about before the woes that he had predicted also came true. There was much suffering yet to endure before the light would shine forth.

¹ Cf. *New American Bible*, footnote to Phil. 3:1, 4:4

As Christians, we look to such passages and see in fuller measure what in all likelihood Zephaniah could not possibly have comprehended. “On that day,” the Lord will be in our midst.

Our readings for today highlight why it is important for us to be people of hope, as we witness more deeply how it was John the Baptist who prepared the way of the Lord. The Israelites are to shout for joy because the Lord has removed judgment, turned away enemies and remains present in your midst.

This year, we have a special reason to rejoice because our Year of Mercy is upon us. Last Tuesday at St. Peter’s Basilica, on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Francis inaugurated the Year of Mercy, opening the Holy Door at the end of conclusion of the celebration of the Eucharist. In his homily, he noted:

To pass through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them. It is he who seeks us! It is he who comes to encounter us! This will be a year in which we grow ever more convinced of God’s mercy.²

May this truly be a year in which so many faithful, and yes, even those who are questioning their faith, may experience an outpouring of God’s grace and mercy. May they see in Jesus, the door to our own happiness and joy and see know first hand that God’s mercy is always and everywhere, stronger than the weaknesses of our sin.

On the third Sunday in Advent, *Gaudete Sunday*, the Church can no longer contain her joyful longing for the coming of the Savior. This year we have special reason to add to that joy and expectation.

² Pope Francis, homily on the occasion of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 2015.