

St. Paul writes to the Thessalonians a note reminding them that at all times they should hold in their hearts the emotion of joy. Rejoice always, says Paul to the Thessalonians. Rejoice always, pray always, give thanks always. No matter what else, we are to be a people rejoicing, finding the joy that lies in having been found by Jesus and ultimately saved by him. This joy can be heard in the midst of the prophets, whom we heard from today in Isaiah. Isaiah foretells the coming of God's anointed and his final return at the end of time. What joy comes from his Spirit filled heart. Joy is heard in the voice of Mary, as she rejoices in having been chosen to bear the son.

Today in the midst of the waiting season, we light the odd candle in the Advent Wreath. The color change highlights the theme referred to in today's traditional title: Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word for Rejoice, and today is day to rejoice in our expectant waiting. The tradition of the Third Sunday of Advent being called Gaudete Sunday, stretching back to the medieval age, tell us to center our worship today on the excitement of being chosen to receive Jesus into our lives. As much as this Advent time is for doing some inward looking self analysis, so too Advent is a time to enjoy being excited for what is coming. The Advent journey mimics the emotions of expectant parents as they await their new child's birth: emotions ranging from terror at the responsibility and the host of unknowns, to the elated joy of being blessed with a wonderful new life. Today, we celebrate the joy of the expectant parents, wide eyed and breathless as we await the new life that comes.

We wait in amazement at what it means to be joined to God through Christ. Christ, the anointed one, coming among us, reminds us

that God favors us. God wants us to know that his love is supreme. We have nothing to fear anymore. How Amazing! Just imagine having any and all of your doubts and fears wiped away. Money, retirement, health, safety, hunger, all those things that plague us with fear and anxiety, all are no longer problems. Jesus is entering into our lives! Gaudete! Rejoice! Worries about your reputation or community standing fade away; there is no longer a façade to keep up so that people know you belong. The fear in the pit of your stomach that people might figure out your weaknesses or failings disappears like morning dew as the Sun rises. If bumps, bruises, and crippling injuries both physically and mentally have plagued you, Jesus' coming means freedom, as it does for those whom have crossed the legal lines of society and earned a modern scarlet letter. God's Holy One is coming into our lives. Rejoice! Gaudete!

But please get here, already! Because even though we practice this blessed life of being invited into this holy body, this living sacrament, this community of faith that has Christ as its head, we still do become injured and afraid. We still do live in terrible anxiety. We still make bad decisions out of fear and scarcity. Lord we believe in you, but bless us in our disbelieving. Bless us with your presence. Be born into our hearts even more this year. For our faith tell us that your entering into our lives will bring tremendous healing and peace. That is the joy we want, the joy of being set free from our broken, shattered lives. We are prisoners, trapped in pain, yearning to be freed from the many griefs and pains we have collected during our journey. What joy there is the possibility that freedom is almost here.

This joy is more than the joy of a favored sports team reaching the pinnacle of their sport and lifting their vaunted trophy overhead. Cheering fans vicariously living the life of the hero is not the joy we speak of in Gaudete. Tears are more the symbol of the joy that God wants us to have. Tears of reunion between those estranged by anger or loss marks God's Gaudete wish for us. Weeping of relief as hearts are comforted by God is the pattern of life. God's coming into the world means this world, and each of us, is no longer cast aside but instead drawn together by the bonds of love. A love beyond understanding pours into the heart and overflows, pouring out of eyes made wet.

God is preparing to bless us, let's get ready. Let's clean the house, set up lights to invite the joy in, maybe even adopt some strange customs like cutting down live trees and covering them in little hanging baubles of gold and glass. Why not? We are so excited to have the Prince of Peace on the way. The expectant joy of Advent leads us to being a bit extravagant with our houses. Now some may take it too far, perhaps out of some anxiety over having to keep up with the neighbors, but excitement is not a bad motive. We can be excited in what is coming.

Gaudete joy affects us all. Every child knows that only the good children get gifts, yet we all excuse a child for getting so excited that Christmas is coming that they run around the house, ask pestering questions like "how many days until Christmas?", and then asking it again every couple of hours. And our frustrated response is to teach the lesson of joyful expectation: you'll have to wait.

There is a danger in the joyful Advent waiting. We may decide to wait. We may decide to put on hold the work that cries out to us. Saying

'Just wait, you can't celebrate yet' would be to forget who we are, an Easter People, whom carry the torch of Jesus' life and mission into the world. Yes, pause to consider how we might greet the child in a new way this year, having prepared a new humble cattle stall in our hearts for the gift of God's love to find a home. But we cannot forget that we have already received so much. So Gaudete! Rejoice! Spread the joy of God as we prepare to celebrate how he comes into our lives and wants to come in even more. Even as we set a time aside to wait for God, to connect ourselves to the waiting of all creation for the coming of God to draw all things to himself at the end of time, we spread our joy to everyone, especially those who could use some joy. After all, they have been chosen to receive Jesus, too.

So even as we wait, even as we long for more of God, we also savor that he does come, that he does enter in. We have every right to rejoice, for God has chosen us, us here and all of our friends and neighbors, to receive the Prince of Peace.

Madeliene L'Engle's poem 'First Coming'.

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.

He died with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!