

Today is Gaudete Sunday, a word that means "Rejoice!" As we enter the third week of Advent, we change the colors on the advent wreath and our vestments as we move from the penitential purple to a more joyful rose. This always reminds me of Fr. Howard, God bless his soul, he always said, "It's not pink it's rose!" Like the changing colors of the stop light, we take notice and move from penance to joy. Today I want to take you on a little "joy ride," as we explore the reason, we as Christians are joyful on this day, and how to multiply this joy as we prepare for Christmas and the New Year.

Though not a popular topic in any day and age, God's judgement plays an essential role in the joy of this day. Our first reading is from the book of Zephaniah. The US Catholic Bishops Conference has an online bible and the introduction for this book says, "Zephaniah's prophecy of the judgment on Judah and Jerusalem emphasizes, perhaps more than any other prophecy, the devastation and death that divine judgment will bring."

John the Baptist also speaks of judgement when he addresses the crowds who come for baptism. Just prior to today's gospel he says, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." These prophetic warnings would have weighed heavily on the people of the time, and they still grab our attention today. However, they also set the stage for the joy of Christmas that we know as Christians.

Our lives on this earth can be compared to the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt. Living in the desert, we are trying to get to the Promised Land. We are aiming for heaven, but we know that we are not worthy to be admitted into the gates of heaven, due to the baggage of our sins. But in our first reading, Zephaniah says, "The Lord has removed the judgment against you. The King of Israel, the Lord is in your midst. Fear not Zion, be not discouraged! He will rejoice over you with gladness and RENEW you in His love." This is God's promise of renewal! The judgment we face at the end of our lives is real, but, through the miracle of Christmas, God provides a path of redemption as he sends us His only Son who becomes incarnate and saves the world.

So, what is our path, and how does Christ redeem us? John the Baptist says about the Christ who is coming after him, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The holiness that we lack, that keeps us from achieving our goal of heaven, is overcome by Christ in multiple ways. First, our cleansing through the waters of baptism, and the sacrament of reconciliation, wipes away our sins and make us clean again. So, our path takes us to visit a priest and make a good confession at Christmas time and throughout the year.

Second, the gift of the Holy Spirit helps us, through grace, to grow in holiness and avoid future sin. In his commentary, John Shea says, "The Holy Spirit is the spiritual energy to share with others and not oppress them. This is the fire that both purifies every moral effort and provides the passion to persevere." We let the Spirit of holiness guide us on the path to heaven when we listen to our hearts and act on the needs of the world.

Finally, our path takes us into prayer to ask for God's help. In the 2nd reading Paul says, "Make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." In prayer, we humbly give over our worries and struggles to God and receive the peace of Christ in return.

Forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and God's loving kindness, THIS is why we REJOICE as we approach Christmas, because our eternal salvation is made possible by the Christ Child who is our Savior and King. As the song says, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel." Immanuel which means, "God is with us."

The 5th verse of this song ties all of today's scripture together:

"O come, O Key of David,  
come and open wide our heavenly home.  
Make safe for us the heavenward road  
and bar the way to death's abode."

Essentially, it asks Jesus to deliver us safely to our eternal dwelling place.

And so, we rejoice. We ask Christ to lead us in our lives, to practice Christian virtues, and by doing so, spread the joy of Christ to others. Let's open our hearts and encounter Christ at our mass today in a profound way, as we reenact his Last Supper, thankful for his sacrifice, and ready to serve Him in the year to come.