

The Third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday. The word means rejoice and comes from the first word of Philippians 4:4, which is read today, and was traditionally read at the start of Mass on this day. (Rejoice always and again I say rejoice). It is the day when we light our pink candle, and if we are fasting during Advent, it is a day when we are invited to break our fast for the day.

I love this passage from the Philippians because in so many ways I think it captures the essence of what is hard and how we might face challenges in our lives. In the passage we hear from Paul today, he is closing the letter with final exhortations, and these statements stem from Paul's certainty in what God is doing to rectify the whole world. He urges the Philippians to rejoice, twice in verse 4, but in the letter there are sixteen instances of Paul employing the language of joy or rejoicing¹.

But to understand the weight of this encouragement, we need to appreciate that for Paul, rejoicing is not dependent on circumstances. The letter to the Philippians is

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-philippians-44-7-5>

written in a time of waiting, not unlike Advent, and in many ways not unlike waiting for the end of a Pandemic.

Waiting is hard work. For Paul the waiting is occurring in a prison cell, and the outcome does not look promising. For the Philippians, the waiting occurs as they long for news of their beloved church leader, their pastor and friend, their partner in mission. They have even been waiting for Epaphroditus, one of their own, whom they sent to minister to Paul and who came close to death, risking his life for the work of Christ (2:25-30). They have been eager to hear news and hoping for a good outcome.

For us who live in an age when often news is instance – we hear things on our phones or media devices almost immediately. But in an age where there was no social media or electronic communication this letter from Paul must bear the not only the news but the hopes, dreams, and even inspirational joy of a community. Paul writes to encourage the church to continue to be faithful even under the continuing threat of suffering and in the face of uncertainty. And what consumes

Paul's final advice in such a difficult period – not despair but nothing less than pure joy.

Gaudete, “Rejoice always.” Paul's instructions are very brief and very general. Furthermore, the verbs are all plural. Paul is not speaking to individuals as much as he is to the entire community. They are all to rejoice. He encourages them not to waste energy worrying, but to rejoice in the knowledge that they are surrounded by God's love and peace. It is the most wondrous image and challenge.

Joy in faith is not predicated on our success or comfort or certainty; but it is something to be done at all times and in all circumstances. It is the gift Advent invites us to hold onto.

They are wonderful words as we move through this advent season, but also as we reflect on different things that we have happen in our lives. How do we stand firm, how do we rejoice when things do not go to plan? When we fear the Christmas will be cancelled, or the ongoing pandemic will lead to the loss of our job? How do we find joy when we are grieving or facing a difficult family situation. It is a challenge, but Paul's challenge is not a glib retort – it is an

invitation to be grounded in our faith in all circumstances and at all times. Paul knows that there are many things that we can't change, but we can change our attitude towards them. He also realises that that other will only experience God if they can see in us the hope and joy which God offers – regardless of the circumstance.

If we think this is beyond any human, then maybe we can look at the example of John the Baptist, who we also remember on this third Sunday of Advent. This is the 2nd week we have reflected on the nature of John's ministry. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), John the Baptist is a prophet who has an important ministry in his own right. He calls people to repentance and eventually dies as a martyr.

Luke portrays John in such a way that there is now doubt in his credentials as a prophet. The passage we hear today from Luke 3 can roughly be split into three sections. First (verses 7-9), he addresses potential excuses for why those who have come to listen might not repent. He then goes on to explain to the crowds what they need to do. He explains

that they to provide generously for those in need. Then, two groups recorded in the story -- tax collectors and soldiers -- ask the same question. The third and final section of John's proclamation (Luke 3:15-17) depicts him doing exactly what he has just advised. That is, he shows that he knows his role, and he refuses to push beyond his authority: When the people wonder whether John is the promised Messiah is (3:15), he responds by making it very clear that he is subordinate to the one who is coming (3:16).^{2?}

In many ways it seems like a strange passage to read in conjunction with passages about joy. And yet, Luke locates very clearly, that this is taking place not only in the wilderness but also with the most poor - the most excluded within that community.

Luke is less interested in contrasting the ministry, mission, and message of John and Jesus with that of the Pharisees and Sadducees than he is of stressing that their message is for all people. If John instructs, rather than condemns, the poor, the corrupt tax collector, and the excluded, then who, is

² From Michal Beth Dinkler, Assistant Professor of New Testament, Yale Divinity School.

excluded. The answer, as it turns out, is no one. John preaches to all, Jesus comes for all. Apparently, when Luke quotes Isaiah as saying that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God,” (3:6), he really means it.³ The vision we get in this passage from Luke’s Gospel, and one which John the Baptist lead us too, is that the message of God, the message of Jesus is truly ‘Good news’ – and good news is something worth rejoicing. It brings us out of our circumstances to a place where we are all welcome.

In both these passages we have communities who are waiting – longing for things to change – longing for things to be different.

We may resonate with these feelings. We live in an impatient time. We are used to getting things quickly – delivered immediately. Yet the circumstance of our lives at present means often we have to wait. There is no immediate answer to when the pandemic might end – we have to wait for the science. But we need remember we are not the first generation who had to wait and nor will we be the last.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-37-18-2>

Paul reminds us to make use of our waiting, to pray and rejoice in our faith. Luke's John reminds us that our waiting is worth it for Good news is coming and the Good news is that we are all included in God's promise of hope.

Advent, is a time of waiting to be used well. And the invitation from our readings today is to use this time to be joyful in God; joyful in our living and embrace the good news that is to come. A daily practice of joyful, thankful, and hopeful prayer.

Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.