

Third Sunday of Advent  
Year C

Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Canticle 9  
Philippians 4:4-7  
Luke 3:7-13

In this Advent season, we have been called upon to wait and prepare. These seem to be at the heart of what the Advent season is all about -waiting and preparing. But, there is much more to this season than waiting for the coming of Jesus and preparing our hearts and lives for that coming. In anticipation of the coming, we also have the opportunity to rejoice. Paul states it best in the reading from his letter to the people in Philippi. "Rejoice in the Lord." But, what does he mean "rejoice."

This is not a "Don't worry, be happy" kind of feeling. Bobby McFerrin sang this peppy tune in 1988 when life seemed much simpler. For me, the late 1980s were a time of little responsibility, though I did have a small family to feed and house, but I remember life as being less complicated. Happiness was contained in work and home.

Paul's idea of rejoicing is much different. Happiness is not equal to rejoicing because, at its core, happiness is rather shallow. To rejoice, especially in the Lord, is a far deeper state of mind. First, it is "in the Lord." Happiness implies everything is going well, whereas rejoicing can happen in any environment, even one that is full of uncertainty. This was the case for the Philippians. There was much in the church that was fraught with uncertainty. There were opponents who were causing suffering; there were some people teaching an alternative lifestyle; and there was a conflict between two of the leaders within the community. Any of these issues could cause this new congregation to fracture.

With all this going on, how could Paul tell them to rejoice? Some might have wondered aloud, are you kidding me? Rejoice now? Don't you know what is going on here? There is a reason Paul stated earlier in this letter all that he was going through - he did understand the trials these people were going through. He did know all they faced, yet even from his prison cell, he could call on them to rejoice. But, he is clear that this is not some shallow happiness, but a rejoicing "in the Lord."

We also face uncertainty in our world. We worry about inflation - how far is our income going to cover our expenses. Will we have money left at the end of the month or will we have month left at the end of the money? These are real questions that people face every day. Some are uncertain about our country and the state of politics. There are wars raging in many places and we have loved ones who might be caught up in those conflicts. Does Paul understand the world we live in when he says, "Rejoice"?

Beyond mere rejoicing, Paul asks us to be an example to those around us. He says to let our gentleness be known. This word "gentleness" might better be translated as generosity or consideration of others. We are to be examples of helping others get through this time of trial,

even as Paul did himself. We can do this by not letting everything get us down - not worrying about all of the little things that creep up on us in our lives. Paul gives us a simple formula to help keep a positive, rejoicing spirit - "by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." We are not in this alone. We don't have to carry all of the burdens of this world on our shoulders. Paul is telling us to give these burdens to God and let God handle it. Then, we can have that peace which surpasses all understanding.

Rejoice! Paul is emphatic in this. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice." By asking God to be with us in and through all of the difficulties we face in this world, we can take time this Advent season to rejoice. "The Lord is near."