

*Readings*

Zep 3:14-18a

Is 12:2-3, 4, 5-6

Phil 4:4-7

Lk 3:10-18

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As a child, I remember my father, a catechist, preparing an Advent wreath a couple of weeks before the season began. In our family of eight siblings, we had a cherished tradition: the four younger siblings would light the four Advent candles one year, and the four older siblings would do so the next. My mother and father took turns lighting the Christmas candle, the fifth candle in the middle, with my mother taking one year and my father the next. My youngest sister would always light the first purple candle, then the second youngest would light the second purple candle, and as the sixth sibling, I had the privilege of lighting the rose candle, the *Gaudete* candle. Even today, the excitement and joy I felt in lighting that candle remains vivid. The sense of peace and happiness it brought me is something I will always treasure.

I work at Villanova Preparatory School in Ojai, California as a theology teacher and chaplain. A few weeks ago, while picking up an Amazon delivery from the front office patio, I encountered a group of resident students who were there for the same purpose. One of them asked me, “Father, is it worth the money you get for what you do here at Villanova?” I paused for a moment before responding and asked, “Why do you ask that question?” Another student quickly chimed in, “Because the more money you have, the better.” I took a moment to reflect and then replied, “It’s not the money that makes it worth it, it’s the joy that comes with what I do

here at Villanova. The joy of teaching you, the joy of eating with you, the joy of listening to your stories, challenges, struggles, accomplishments, and celebrations.” They said, “Thank you, Father, for being here for us” and left with smiles on their faces, leaving me with a smile on my face and a feeling of contentment in my heart.

The main theme of today’s readings is to “Rejoice” and we do that by recognizing the fact that Jesus Christ dwells among us to reconcile us to God the Father. It is also the midpoint of our journey towards the celebration of the Big Day, Christmas. Today’s Mass begins with the opening antiphon, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near,” which is a reminder for us all to be joyful. Today we will light the rose candle on the advent wreath and the priest might wear the rose colored vestments at Mass. It is because the rose color symbolizes joy.

Today’s readings call us to rejoice, not in the temporary, visible things of this world but in the deep, unseen realities of God’s love and presence among us. We hear in today’s first reading from Zephaniah that “The LORD, your God, is in your midst” and this message is echoed throughout Advent season, inviting us to rejoice in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite poems is by Adyashanti titled “The Shape of Love.” In this poem he talks about how the visible things depend on something intangible and invisible (God). He mentions true joy in these words: “How much does Joy weigh when held in the palm of your hand?” That is exactly what *Gaudete* Sunday is all about. We can definitely feel the joy of God becoming human for our salvation but cannot weigh or measure it.

The prophet Zephaniah in today’s first reading gives us the message of hope and reassurance. He reminds us when he says, “He will rejoice over you with gladness,” because God

sends His only begotten son to redeem humanity from the slavery of sin. Ultimately, it is His Son, our pure joy, that keeps us strong in our faith in him. This renewal is not something visible but a change of heart, a *metanoia*.

I recently watched the movie called *A Christmas Carol* (2009 version), an adaptation of Charles Dickens' book. As the film starts, the main character "Scrooge" is grumpy and angry but as he goes on a journey of his past, present, and future he lets go of bitterness and transforms to be a kind, forgiving, and joyful person. Likewise the message of transformation from misery to joy and celebration is announced by Zephaniah saying:

Shout for joy, O daughter Zion!  
Sing joyfully, O Israel!  
Be glad and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem!  
The LORD has removed the judgment against you  
he has turned away your enemies...

As we move closer to Christmas, let us listen to the invitation of Zephaniah to rejoice. As I mentioned above, two very precious moments of joy from my life experiences. Those moments though unrelated and different are deeply connected. The joy and excitement of lighting the *Gaudete* candle as a little boy and the fulfillment I find in my Augustinian vocation as a priest today both originate from a deeper understanding of what brings true peace and joy. It is the unity of humanity with divinity through the birth of Jesus Christ. It is not the material wealth or fame but the opportunity to lead a life of service and joy. During this time of preparation and prayer, these experiences remind us to find meaning in our words and actions and cherish the moments of God's grace that help us shape our lives.

As God has shared his Son with humanity for its salvation, let's carry this joy forward and share it with others. Let us trust in the true presence of the invisible God who dwells among us visibly in Jesus Christ, our Lord.