

*Don't worry - Be happy.*

Let me admit this right up front. There is something about today that has always put me slightly ill at ease. This Third Sunday of Advent, the pink one, is a bit weird for me. Perhaps this stems from my theological upbringing, when the pink day was described to me as the break day in Advent. "The other weeks in Advent are times of penitence," I was told. "Today is our day to kick back and be happy and joyful."

What? I admit I am a little oversensitive about this issue, but the whole notion that Advent is supposed to be a mini-Lent, that we are preparing for the one who is to come by scourging ourselves and making ourselves feel miserable, is in my mind a total distortion of the Gospel. God knows Advent is stressful and anxiety ridden enough for all of us already without us creating our own little penitential nightmare. I remain troubled with any religious notion that equates preparation, expectation and contemplation with pain and suffering, so the translation of this Sunday as a week off from that annoys me no end. I'm also frosted by the idea that we aren't supposed to be joyful the only three weeks of Advent. How can we not be filled with joyful anticipation? Isn't that the point?

But I think there is more to my feelings than my own little theological prejudices. For example, there is that song you just heard. Now I know this is a ridiculously busy time for all of us and perhaps even more so for those in my profession. But that is no excuse for the banal sermons we often hear on this day, many of which could be replaced by just singing Mr. McFerrin's insipid little song. Because preachers have little time to properly examine and expose today's readings for our present time, Advent Three has often turned into some sort of sappy, overly-simplistic message about not worrying, because as McFerrin says, "when you worry you make it double." And here at the time of year when many of us really need help with the difficulties we are facing, and a thoughtful way to approach very difficult dilemmas in our lives, the preacher says, "You say you just got kicked out of your house, your husband just left you and the dog died? Don't worry - be happy." Well, thank you very much. That is sooo helpful.

Underlying all that though, there is still something else that irritates me about Gaudete Sunday, (from the Latin word, *gaudere*, to rejoice). It took me years to figure out exactly what it was, but it finally hit me. Today's readings remind me of something else that ruffles me, something from our own culture, a genre with which I have never really related or even understood.

Let's look at the readings and see if you see it too. We start with Zephaniah. The whole book of Zephaniah is only three chapters long. Thank God, because Zephaniah is the most morose of all the prophets. Zephaniah makes Rodney Dangerfield sound like a gleeful optimist. Then suddenly, in the midst of his constant doom and gloom, Zephaniah shouts in today's reading "REJOICE and EXULT with all your heart!" Say what?

Then in our reading from Philippians, we hear Paul do his Bobby McFerrin act. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Do not worry about anything..." While this is unusual enough to hear from the guy who is sure the world is ending momentarily, the setting is what really makes today's words so surprising. Paul says them from his jail cell.

Finally, we have the piece de resistance in that Gospel. Our pal John the Baptizer, the model for fire and brimstone preachers to this day, finishes with one of the great oxymorons of all time. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; BUT THE CHAFF HE WILL BURN WITH UNQUENCHABLE FIRE. And so, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Wow, who could handle more good news than that?

Of course, none of these situations of rejoicing in the context in which

they sit seem to make any sense. Suddenly, without warning, three people stand up in the middle of our Advent and they start singing... “O what a beautiful morning! O what a wonderful day! I’ve got a wonderful feeling, everything’s going my way!” Yes, beloved the Third Sunday of Advent is just like the great American musical. Andrew Lloyd Weber chose the passion as the setting for Jesus Christ Superstar. But think what he could do with today’s readings. Just imagine Paul lying in his cell, weak as a puppy, chained to the wall, no hope no where. But then, he bursts to his feet and sings at the top of his lungs, “June is busting out all over!”, even though it is December. That’s what today is all about. Today there is joy in Mudville because today is light at the end of the tunnel Sunday.

So despite my own little mental block with musicals, how do we get in on the act? How do we feel like singing in the rain? We need not go on any extensive study of the text to find the answer today. We heard in that first reading, that the reason the people are full of joy in the midst of the oppression they have continually faced is that they have suddenly realized that the “king of Israel, Yahweh, is in their midst.” To make sure we didn’t miss it, the author says it again two sentences later. “The Lord is in your midst.” Not an empty, “don’t worry, be happy, because everything’s gonna be

all right,” to quote another singer, but something a little bit deeper.

Everything is going to be okay, because they have come to the sudden realization that God is with them in their suffering.

It is the same for us as we hit the backstretch of Advent. Though Christmas has not yet come, we still know that Christ is actively among us. The joy of this Sunday comes from the realization that our Christmas preparations are not really about a coming event, but rather about a clarity of vision. A clarity that allows us to see beyond the literal and realize that God is already here. Today is all about seeing beyond the obvious, and realizing that the one we await is also already here. It sounds pretty Buddhist and maybe it is. Here and not here at the same time.

It is a great cause for celebration when we receive this clear vision of God in our midst. But when we get to our Gospel and the fiery fury of John the Baptizer, we learn that awareness of God is not the end of the story. The Pharisees who come to the river to be baptized, are certainly aware of God. But what they do with that knowledge is more than a little upsetting to the Baptizer.

Rather than basking in the joy of the fact that they have experienced God, and spreading that delight and compassion to others, they see God's

presence in their life as something special God has done *only* for them. They have taken the joy of their experience of God and replaced it with a holier than thou attitude. “I know God and you do not, therefore I am among God’s chosen and you are not.”

John the Baptizer makes it clear in some pretty graphic language that they would have been better off not having felt God’s presence in the first place. Because when we experience God’s grace, the result is supposed to be a desire to share God’s love with others. Instead, they have turned God’s presence in their lives into a justification to believe they are superior to others. Rather than bringing them closer to others, the gift of God’s presence has actually had the opposite effect. It has alienated them from people different than themselves.

Of course what the Pharisees do today is not something unique to them. It is the same mistake that we continue to make. We have a revelation of God and suddenly we think that our revelation is the only valid experience. We start telling people that THE ONLY way to know God is the way we have learned to know God. We suggest, for example, that the birth we are awaiting is the only valid experience of God for anyone and tell others that if they are not Christian, if they don’t buy into Christmas, they are

doomed. It is this exclusive attitude that makes John scream at people today and has continued to be the bane of religious thought all the way up to today.

That is exactly what is going on in today's Gospel. The people coming to get baptized by John are chastised by him because they have come to the conclusion that because they are descendants of Abraham, (that is law abiding Jews) they are the righteous ones, while others are not. They know God whereas others outside their tradition do not. We hear the Christian equivalent of the Pharisees response, "We have Abraham as our ancestor" all the time. It is "We have accepted Christ as our Savior." When our discovery of Christ's presence in our life becomes a self-righteous justification that we are better than people who have experienced God in other ways, then we have fallen into the same trap as those John chastises today.

In this tradition, we may not fall as often into the chosen people trap. But we certainly do believe in a spiritual pedigree and we are certain we have one and others do not. We tend to think that because we emphasize being a thinking person's church and require our clergy to have a certain level of education, that somehow this makes our faith deeper and more mature than someone else's. That also is no different than the holier than thou attitude

displayed by some Pharisees in the Gospel.

When the one whose sandal John says he is not worthy to untie does come, he will disagree with the Baptizer about all this unquenchable fire stuff. But he will consistently agree with the Baptist on this issue of self-righteousness that makes John come out of his skin in anger today. Jesus will spend a large percentage of his ministry making this same point that the Baptist stresses today. He will move outside the Jewish establishment and welcome all those without the spiritual pedigree, over and over again.

Jesus has an easy time with sinners. They can hear his message. But the righteous are like Fort Knox. They are so filled with their values and their way of knowing God and so walled off from those who do not share their beliefs, that even the explosiveness of the Gospel does not move them.

Therefore, if we are going to experience the rejoicing of the American musical in our own lives, our response must be two fold. We begin with that realization that the people in Zephaniah's time had, that God is in our midst, no matter what. But instead of getting all smug with that knowledge, John points us another way. Instead of asking someone whether they have accepted Christ as their personal savior or put someone down for not being mature in their faith, what we are asked to do is share with them. Give of

ourselves and our personal possessions to those who need it. That is what makes us break out in song. That is what makes us rejoice in the most unlikely and surprising situations, just like in all those musicals.

What we hear today from John is that faith is not about who you are or who you know or your spiritual pedigree or even what you believe. Faith he says quite plainly is about right action. The one who is to come will make that even more clear. It is time once and for all to abandon my way or the highway theology. It is time to accept all of the world as our kin. Those who have spent their lives believing that their revelation of God is the only true way of knowing God, may not hear today's Gospel as good news. But for anyone who has ever been kept outside the gate by those who self-righteously believe only they have the keys to the kingdom, today's Gospel is about the best news ever.

This is what we are called to do on this Third Sunday of Advent. So let us head out into that desert and proclaim to a desperately needy and hurting world that the poverty, the oppression, and the inequity that they are facing is not the last word. The last word is THE Word, the Word that was there at the beginning, and is coming soon. And that is a message of good news so wonderful that we could all just burst into song. Amen.

*"Sound of Music" finale*