

CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

3rd Sunday of Advent | For Sunday, December 12, 2021

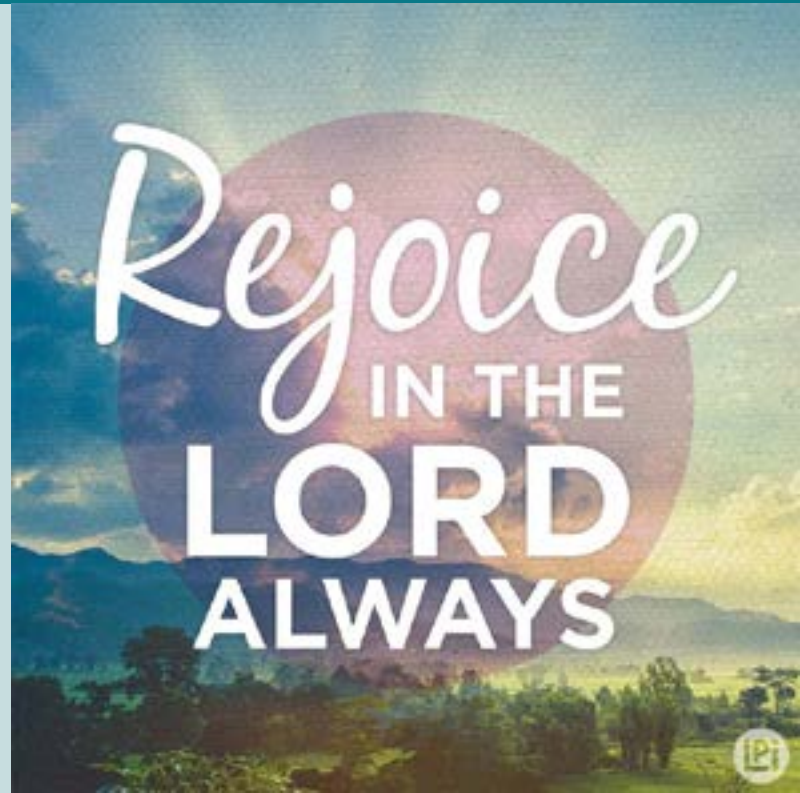
Rejoice in the Presence of God!

Written by Fr. Mark Suslenko

Zephaniah 3:14-18a

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18



"Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel!" "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!" These words from the Prophet Zephaniah and the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians frame the festive call of Gaudete Sunday. Pausing to rejoice may seem a bit of a challenge to some. We all grapple with life at times. These struggles can be so overwhelming and intense that they rob us of joy and a sense of peaceful wellbeing. Personal, corporate, familial, ecclesial, and social conflicts are all too plentiful. We are constantly bumping elbows with our weaknesses and sinfulness as well as those of the world. Our sad, painful cries reveal our incompleteness.

But, if we listen carefully, we can hear within our discomfort God's call to peace, to move beyond and heal the sadness and journey to a better place. We yearn for this but are not always clear as to how it can be achieved. God is constantly beckoning us to grow and change. Is this not the message of Christ? In Christ, God reveals incredible things about who He is and who we are. Life's eternal destiny is made known. He is with us and brightens the often dark recesses of human hearts. We have to see ourselves in Christ. The source of hope, life, love, faith, and meaning has been revealed.

However, accepting God's invitation stretches us a bit. We have to leave old and static ways behind and search for something new. We can even experience discomfort and anxiety as we move and change. Growing pains are more than physical. We do not need to look far for pain and heartache. Our mirrors reveal a good measure of it. Our world cries as inflation soars, food banks struggle to feed the hungry, the devastating effects of climate change continue, the pandemic lingers, political corruption abounds, racial injustice persists, and our borders remain unwelcome places of conflict. This partial list outlines what is ailing humankind. Add anger, growing resentment, frustration, exhaustion, and impatience, and the situation is potentially volatile. Our Church, living in the modern world, also feels the effects of the tides of conflict, disillusionment, division, and change.

Where is God's invitation being revealed in all that is happening within and without? Pope Benedict XVI gives us a hint in his encyclical, *Saved in Hope*. He writes that it is "only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere." In short, a deep life of faith assures us that no matter what or where life brings us, God is still working. We will not fall apart or fall into despair! Human nature leads us to believe that any experience of joy is deferrable to some future time when sadness, stress, disharmony, and discontent are no more. Believing this to be true, we find ourselves waiting for the day when the lion can actually peacefully lay down with the lamb. Until then, we cling to our misery and apathy. We convince ourselves that we are victims and hence, powerless. Today, however, we are reminded to rejoice in the Lord "always!" We have to open a path to it now, amid unsettling and disturbing situations, and not defer it to the future.

We are not finished but are all works in progress. Our faith reminds us that creation groans and is in agony. We are all on the path to fulfillment and redemption, an assurance revealed to us in the Birth of Christ. Even though life moves us to stumble over our weaknesses and sinfulness, we can as Pope Benedict reminds us, "open ourselves to truth, to love, to what is good. We can free our life and the world from the poisons and contaminations that could destroy the present and the future. This makes sense even if outwardly we achieve nothing or seem powerless in the face of overwhelming hostile forces." Discord and suffering are a part of life and often cannot be controlled. But we fail to see that what we ultimately seek is something we already have! Do we not want the faith that brings the assurance that God has things in His care? Do we not wish to have a love that allows us to see the beauty and goodness that abounds, even amid heartache and despair? Do we not desire to possess the hope that God will bring us to the oneness of His Kingdom where all is fulfilled in the blessed presence of Christ? This is why we rejoice today. What we seek has already been given to us in Christ. God has profoundly and intimately touched all humanity and all creation. When we journey with our friends of faith, hope, and love, then even in the midst of darkness and uncertainty, we will experience joy! We will know, beyond doubt, that

Divine Surprises will come and that lasting peace is our inheritance. This is not something we can earn. It is a pure and unconditional gift. God's perfect gift was revealed to us in the birth of Christ. That same gift can be born again in each of us. This is the miracle of Christmas.

PRAYER

Open your heart to receive the gift of joy!
God has something wonderful,
inspiring and exciting for you to do.

Pray with St. Francis:

"Most high and glorious God,
lighten the darkness of my heart
and give me sound faith, firm hope
and perfect love.

Let me, Lord, have right feelings
and knowledge,
so that I can carry out the task
that you have given me in truth."

Christ is born within you.
You are forever changed.
Rejoice!
Amen.

Our celebration today makes perfect sense. Look above and beyond whatever is unsettling, disturbing, or hurtful. Leave the fear, uncertainty, and anxiety aside, and see God's truth and the truth of who you are. Rejoice! Forget about what happens tomorrow and beyond. Deal only with today. The future brings its challenges as it unfolds into the present. Control what you can and depart from what you cannot. God's friends, blessed faith, hope, and love, are within you. They are His gift. There are no requirements to earn them. Accept them as God's tender, intimate, and loving blessing. Rejoice that Someone as beautiful and magnificent as God thinks so highly of you! This is what gives life its importance.

Fr. Mark Suslenko