

Advent is a curious time.

The hymns are often in a minor key. They're expectant and yet not always very cheerful.

The scripture readings for a lot of Advent are about tough subjects like repentance and the end of time. John the Baptist is anything but cheery. And the prophets - well it's their job to share messages of tough love. Yet here we are, at the start of the third week, lighting the pink candle, not because of Mary or any other female driven reason, but because it is Gaudete (Gau de tay) Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for rejoice and so today, quite properly, is "Rejoice Sunday."

Given the fact that John the Baptist starts his sermon by calling the crowd a "brood of vipers" – it may be a little hard to believe this is a day dedicated to rejoicing – but it is.

Last night after they worshipped with their Catholic community (today it will be Lutheran) but last night my mom texted—

*You all know about the pink candle in the Advent Wreath - to celebrate JOY in the midst of the Advent season of more somber waiting? (Actually, I always forget that's what it's about.) Turns out the Catholics are much more into celebrating this Rose Sunday. SO tonight the paraments and vestments were pink (or rose) and there were roses by the altar. Father Don insisted we all take one home. And there was a picture of a bright fuchsia pink rose.*

The Roman Catholics and Episcopalians are much better about putting on the pink. They always remember that this is Joy Sunday.

To be clear - it's Joy Sunday, not Happiness Sunday. Gaudete is a call to rejoice – not look for happiness. We don't always make a clear distinction between the two – happiness and joy – but I think we should.

Christopher Benek explains it like this. "happiness is an emotion in which we 'experience feelings ranging from contentment and satisfaction to bliss and intense pleasure,' whereas joy 'is a stronger, less common feeling than happiness.'

"We experience joy when we achieve selflessness to the point of personal sacrifice. We feel joy when we are spiritually connected to God or people."

It's kind of like cookies and cotton candy. Trust me on this, there are plenty of cookies around this month, so you can test out this theory.

When I was a kid – my friend Debbie and I decided to make cookies. Nobody was home at her house and I'm pretty sure my mother didn't know we were in Debbie's kitchen baking our first ever batch of cookies.

We didn't use a recipe. After all, we'd seen our mothers make cookies. How hard could it be? We had shortening, flour, sugar and eggs. I don't think we used any baking soda and I know we didn't put in any salt. Just Crisco, flour, sugar, eggs and LOTS of blue food coloring.

The first taste seemed okay. But really, they were beyond disappointing. They were very blue and very sweet. And they were nothing like the cookies our mothers made. They were terrible, in large part because there wasn't any balance in the flavors. There was no salt. They were just sweet without any depth to the flavor.

For me, happiness is good and sweet and lovely. But it is more like cotton candy than cookies. Joy on the other hand can come even when there are tears and pain. It is richer and deeper. And

sustains us in a way that happiness never can. And so today we hear Zephaniah proclaim *Rejoice and Exult with all your heart!* And Paul – well his letter to the Philippians is all about sharing the joy

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The church in Philippi was one of Paul's favorites. You can tell by the things he says and the way he says them. And they were very attached to him. About ten years after visiting them, Paul wrote to the church from a Roman prison. Although his life was in jeopardy, Paul told his friends, "I want you to know, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest, that my imprisonment is for Christ." And he went on to say that his eagerness to share the word of God, even while he was in jail, made the Roman Christians all the more confident and bold in their own sharing of the story of Jesus Christ.

A couple of years later, after his trial was finally held, Paul was executed for his faith and for his passionate sharing of the story of Jesus. Since he was a Roman citizen, Paul was beheaded rather than crucified. His martyrdom had always been a possibility, right from the start. And yet this is the guy who writes such beautiful words about the importance of joy.

***Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!***

Paul's words are not written shyly or even as a kind invitation. They are written as an imperative. A directive. It's nearly a command or an order. Rejoice! And do it always! In any circumstance. Sweet or salty. Tears or smiles. Rejoice always. And do it "in the Lord." That's the critical phrase.

Professor Holly Hearan says, "There are many things that can be a cause of rejoicing: good news; an unexpected reprieve; achievement of a hard-won goal. In some cases, the "joy" will be fleeting. Where the cause of rejoicing has an enduring impact, the "joy" will continue. To "rejoice in the Lord always" points to a "joy" that is not only enduring, but that sustains us even when we are worn down by life challenges. This requires something more than seasonal cheerfulness. It is a "joy" rooted in an ongoing relationship..." with God and with God's people."

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Paul wasn't naïve or foolish. He knew as well as anyone that holding onto the joy that is found in God takes effort. But in this little paragraph from this too brief letter, he gives some practical advice on how to live a full life. A life of joy and faith.

Paul's command to rejoice is not a call to rejoice despite everything else going on in their lives. It's not even that they are to rejoice through gritted teeth - instead the imperative is that Christians should rejoice in all the goodness that is found in God and in the blessings God gives.

It is in looking to God that we can truly rejoice. The road we travel may be difficult -- even distressing -- but we can look to God and rejoice because God is good and kind and loving. And that never changes. God is always loving and merciful. God's forgiveness is never ending and God's faithfulness never fails.

The second word of advice that Paul gives in today's text is that we should hold on to the character of Christ. ***Let your reasonableness -your gentleness- be known to all.*** Which isn't always easy. They may know we are Christians by our love, but when things aren't going well, when times are tough, it's isn't always easy to show that gentle character to everybody at every time and in every place. Paul's words encourage us to live in contrast to those things in our world which can be harsh or bitter or unfriendly and even cruel. Jesus' life is our primary example of what it is to live a life of gentleness. But we know what happened to Jesus. And yet, Paul wants us to know that we should keep at it. character of Christ, because it is by living in Christ that we experience salvation.

Whatever difficulties we may experience, however we may struggle to follow Christ and to be witnesses to his rule in our lives, we should be strengthened by the news that the Lord is near. This is at the heart of the good news of Christmas. God is near. God is here. Paul's words are intended to bring comfort and consolation, to encourage and strengthen the resolve of anyone who has ever decided they want to follow Jesus. Wherever you go – whatever the circumstance. **Rejoice for the Lord is near.** God is here.

Paul's fourth good word of advice is to **pray with thankfulness**. Those prayers are key to our relationship with God and we all need to be encouraged to take the time to pray.

First, in our prayers we can and should include **everything**. Don't leave anything out. Some things spring quickly to mind, but particularly when it feels as though the world is against us, we should include everything. Second, **don't worry**. We can share our concerns and all our troubles with God – but we don't need to be anxious in the midst of it. Third, **give thanks** to God -- not for the trials -- but for God, for His goodness, for his presence, for his listening ear. For his people who are our consolation and our strength. Who bring the good news of God's love in the things they do and the things they say.

Fourth, **make your requests known** to God. Do we take enough time to ask for God's assistance? A great example is the Israelite slaves in Egypt who cried out to God, telling him about the trials and trauma that they faced every day. God heard their cries. He understood their prayers and responded with love and mercy AND one of the best rescue stories ever!

Fifth piece of advice- **God's peace will be our guard**. When the life of following the Jesus gets tough and it can get tough, it is easy to feel like we have nothing to protect us. We may be as committed as we can to being gentle and loving and kind - but it also makes us vulnerable and that may mean we get taken advantage of or hurt or even abused. Honestly, we can look like suckers. But, Paul is clear that if we **hold on** and we **pray**, then the wonderful, mysterious, **peace of God will guard and keep safe our hearts and minds**. And this is why we rejoice. It's a cyclical thing. We rejoice. We walk in God's way. We stay connected. We remember whose we are. And we come back around to rejoice.

Paul's letters to the Philippians and the other early churches, tell us that if we walk in the ways of God then we will experience joy and other feelings as well: love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and even happiness. Paul is not implying that happiness is all bad. We may feel happy as a result of any number of things. But the larger point is that happiness, as a feeling, is not based on something necessarily being good for us.

Joy, on the other hand, is grounded in the idea that something is good for someone else. We have joy when -- even in our suffering -- we are doing something to care for someone else. Joy is a choice. While happiness is a response to something that happens to us. On this Gaudete Sunday, the children of God are called to rejoice. To see the possibilities for joy that exist all around us.

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This morning the Sunday School kids, the Confirmation students and a bunch of adults made Care Packs that will be shared with people in need. It was an incredible flurry of activity with everyone filling a bag with socks and Band-Aids and granola bars and all kinds of good stuff. Kids and adults wrote notes sharing God's love. And in the middle of it all, I felt like I wanted to cry. Not because I was sad, but because I was joyful. We made over seventy care packs. And I hope you will take one with you to put in your car or carry with you when you are out and about. And I can pretty much guarantee you that in the giving, you will experience far more than happiness. It's an act of joy.