

The Flame of Joy

3rd Sunday of Advent (Year C)

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Feeling down is a real experience for people. Whether it is due to an illness, something we've done to ourselves, something someone else has done to us, or just life in general, all of us feel at least a hint of depression from time to time. This is especially true during the holiday season, a time when we think of our deceased loved ones or realize how dysfunctional our families can be. While not trying to offer a simple solution to a complex problem, I do think that religion can be beneficial to us and help us retain a sense of joy in life.

Joy is the theme for our 3rd Sunday of Advent. Advent is over halfway over and the anticipation is building. Throughout our scripture readings this weekend, there is at least 7 references to joy.

- From the prophet *Zephaniah*: "Shout for joy, O daughter Zion, Sing joyfully, O Israel, be glad and exult"; the Lord "will rejoice over you with gladness," and "God will sing joyfully because of you."
- From *Psalms*: 'Cry out with joy and gladness.'
- From St. Paul to the *Philippians*: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice."
- From our Gospel, while not mentioning joy explicitly, it ends on a high note as it says, "he preached good news to the people."

It's unfortunate that some have reduced religion to a set of rules, moral codes, and an overall impression that we should always look as sad and serious as possible. Of course our religion should be taken seriously, but religion is also there to lift us up, put a smile on our face, let us know that something bigger is taking place, and give us hope to face another day. Life itself is hard; religion shouldn't make matters worse.

Pope Francis has tried very hard these past 5 years to bring joy back into Catholicism. As a church, we had slipped back into the idea that religion was all about suffering. While not dismissing the many ways we do legitimately suffer, nor calling us

to a naive optimism which says 'everything is alright,' he does not want us to ever lose the gift of joy.

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis says, "joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved." (6) In other words, we have joy - even if it is just an ounce at times- because deep down we know that God cares about us. If that isn't the best remedy to feeling down and depressed, I don't know what is?

As a Church, we cannot let our religion lose its joy.

Have I lost my joy? During this 3rd Sunday in Advent, as we see that flicker of light from the pink candle, let us look within us for that flicker of joy, the one that always endures, for it tells us that when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.