

Third Sunday in Advent  
Sermon Text: 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:16-24  
Related Text: Luke 1:46b-55  
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
Date Preached: December 14, 2008

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Some individuals have read various Bible passages in light of their own life circumstances and have come away from such passages saying something to the affect, “Yeah right!” For some, today’s reading from First Thessalonians may fuel such a feeling.

Rejoice Always.

How can one be expected to rejoice always? Such a phrase can almost ring a tone of some pie in the sky wishful thinking.

How does one rejoice when you’ve been told that you no longer have a job? What does it mean to rejoice as another holiday passes by relying on the generosity of others? What does it mean to rejoice when you are suffering from illness or sitting by the bedside of a loved one you know is going to die soon? What does it mean to rejoice when you are in the grips of depression? What does it mean to rejoice when you are grieving the loss of a loved one?

What doesn't help for many is the pressure that is consciously or unconsciously placed upon us to rejoice, to celebrate and be happy.

In some respects we might be able to relate to Mary's circumstances.

Here is a teenager. She is not married, although she and Joseph are engaged. She is visited by an angel who tells her that her entire life is going to be changed. She will bear a child, who will be the savior of the world.

Now, think about this a moment. An unmarried, pregnant woman in Jewish society 2000 years ago was a recipe for disaster. According to Jewish law she could be stoned to death. She would have had little or no protection, not to mention that if she was not stoned she'd have no means of making a living. Mary knew the ramifications of this news.

Mary's response to this is one of faith. First to the angel that announces this news, Mary replies, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Shortly after this Mary travels to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah. They too are blessed as they are

expecting a child, long after the likelihood of having children passed. Elizabeth and her unborn child John, later to be known as John the Baptist are filled with joy.

Mary's response is again, a response of faith. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." In the midst of what otherwise would be a troubling time for her based on Jewish law and social values, not to mention how her parents might have reacted to such news, Mary rejoices.

This rejoicing is not similar to happiness. The meaning of phrase from the original Greek is to express abundant joy. Such abundant joy is not in her earthly circumstances. Such abundant joy is in the presence of God.

As people of faith we not only invite people to rejoice but we can help people rejoice beyond their life circumstances. We're not asking people to rejoice because of their current life's status or situation. We are inviting people to rejoice in the Lord.

Look what the Lord has done. The Lord looks with favor on the lowliness of his servant. The Lord has done great things for me. The Lord has filled me

with good things and the rich are sent away empty. Those were Mary's words in her song of praise we call the magnificat.

Each week in this Advent season as we light the candles on the wreath we sing, Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel. Rejoice because whatever our circumstance, Emmanuel—God is with us.

God is with us in our poverty, be it spiritual, emotional or financial. God is with us in our sorrow, even in the shadows of death. God is with us in the darkest moments of our lives, holding before us the light of his Son Jesus Christ.

It is Jesus who is coming to cast out the darkness of our lives. It is Jesus who lightens our pathways in this world. It is Jesus who comes to us in surprising and ordinary ways, be it a child in Bethlehem, a bloodied man on the cross, the resurrected one who calls us by name, and the one who comes to us each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper saying, "This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you."

Rejoice. It is more than just a pie in the sky don't worry be happy feeling. Rejoice. Emmanuel. God is with you.