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Third Sunday of Advent evokes joy, urgent anticipation

by Marty Haugen

Spiritual Reflections

Marty Haugen's Advent reflections

The Third Sunday of Advent is often referred to as Gaudete ("Rejoice") Sunday. The title comes from the beginning of the Latin introit for this Sunday, "Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete" ("Rejoice in the Lord; again I say, rejoice," Philippians 4:4, from the second reading for this Sunday).

With only one more Sunday before Christmas, the liturgy takes on a more eager and urgent sense of anticipation. The option of rose vestments and a rose candle for the third candle of the Advent wreath help heighten this emphasis. It is not surprising that the verbs "sing" and "rejoice" (synonyms for a musician) are heard over and over in the readings for this Sunday.

Right from the first reading, we hear this note of joy and eager hope from the prophet Zephaniah. Like his contemporary, Jeremiah, he had labored to end pagan worship in Jerusalem. Here he offers a lyric vision of Israel's future: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!"

Many Christians know that the Book of Psalms was most often intended to be chanted or sung. But the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament are filled with many other canticles and songs. This Sunday, rather than with a psalm, the assembly responds with a canticle from the 12th chapter of Isaiah, expressing in song the same unabashed joy and thanksgiving of the readings. Here is a setting, "Cry Out with Joy and Gladness," in which I used a lyric metrical rather than a chanted setting to give impetus and energy to the joy of the text.

Zephaniah 3:14-18a

Isaiah 12:2-3, 4bcd, 5-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18

Full text of the readings

This Sunday, Paul is again writing to the young persecuted community in Philippi, and his words are filled with this same spirit of rejoicing and eager anticipation. As mentioned before, a portion of this text gives the name to this Sunday.

John the Baptist's message to the Israelites seems stern, but Luke reminds us that he is "preaching the Gospel" (the "Good News"). The "Good News" of God and God's reign calls us to a commitment that is not only joyful, but also demands a new vision of how we live in that reign.

Next week, the Gospel will tell the story of the meeting of two women unexpectedly pregnant; the virgin Mary and the elderly Elizabeth. We will hear perhaps the most beloved canticle outside of the psalms: Mary's "Magnificat." Many of the beautiful settings we have of Mary's song are set to chant or to quietly confident hymns. Rory Cooney's "Canticle of the Turning" offers a very different vision. The strength of his text emphasizes the powerful prophetic nature of Mary's song: "He has scattered the proud ... brought down the powerful ... and lifted the lowly." Cooney yoked his text to vibrant Irish folk tune "Star of the County Down." He found that his version of the "Magnificat" did not always go down well in Ireland, where the tune is most often a pub song. However, this text truly and faithfully connects Mary's vision of the incarnation to the voices of prophets before her, and it is a wonderfully strong interpretation of the "Magnificat" and well suits the nature of this Gaudete Sunday.

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"People, Look East" is a wonderfully imaginative Advent carol with a text by Eleanor Farjeon, a devout English Catholic from the first half of the 20th century, best known for "Morning Has Broken". She mystically anticipates Christ's coming as "Love (the Guest, the Rose, the Bird, the Star, the Lord) is on the way." It is usually yoked to the ancient French carol "Besançon." It captures the same joyful hope of the readings for this Sunday.

In 1980, our extended family drew names to create non-material Christmas gifts for each other. "Rejoice, Rejoice!" was written as an Advent carol for my aunt. I wanted the melody to have the simple, direct feel of a strophic carol. The text draws from Isaiah 35, the reading for the Third Sunday of Advent in the A cycle. The hymn has appeared in a number of hymnals of different denominations, and each time the text has undergone the inevitable changes, changing an Advent text to a Christmas text or wrestling with the non-politically correct prophetic images of the "blind" and the "lame." These are not unimportant issues; indeed, the words we proclaim (spoken or sung) carry great weight, and we must prepare and plan thoughtfully so we express the heart of the Word without clouding its rich and deep meaning or disrespecting members of our communities. Over the years, I have learned to be open to adaptations of my own texts in the hope the Spirit might move through our common prayer and reflection more toward something that reflects God's vision rather than our own.

Where I live, local radio stations have been playing Christmas carols 24/7 since days before Thanksgiving. I encourage parish music planners and leaders to help their communities remember and learn and engage in music that lifts up the texts of this Advent season, offering an alternative to the larger cultural view that "you can have Christmas right now."

This is at the heart of our joy and hope this Sunday -- that we might, through prayer, reflecting and common worship, come to a deeper and more true understanding of and action toward the vision of the God's reign of peace, justice and mercy as proclaimed and lived by Jesus, present and still ahead of us.

[Marty Haugen is a composer of liturgical music for Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations, with more than 400 compositions published by GIA, Augsburg Fortress and other publishers.]

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