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We must change our lives to be ready for Jesus

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Many of us probably are aware that this Sunday is referred to during the season of Advent as Gaudete Sunday -- Rejoice Sunday. That's for good reason, as we heard in the first lesson today from the Prophet Zephaniah: "I will leave within you a poor and weak people who seek refuge in God. The remnant of Israel will not act unjustly nor will they speak falsely. They will eat and rest with none to threaten them. Cry out with joy, O daughter of Zion; rejoice O people of Israel! Sing joyfully with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem!"

Certainly a message of joy calling us to joy. When you go to the second lesson today from the letter of St. Paul to the church at Philippi, Paul too has words that call us to joy: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again: Rejoice, and may everyone experience your gentle and understanding heart. The Lord is near; do not be anxious about anything. In everything resort to prayer and supplication together with thanksgiving and bring your requests before God. Then the peace of God, which suppresses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

So rejoice, rejoice in the Lord always. Paul says again, "I say it, rejoice." It's so clear isn't it? These lessons call us to joy. Yet when you consider the context of these lessons, it seems extraordinary that both Zephaniah and Paul could be people calling us to joy and obviously people whom experienced great joy themselves. Zephaniah was proclaiming that message at a time when the people were in exile. They were suffering dramatically.

Their land had been destroyed, their temple destroyed. They had been driven out and had been enduring a long and difficult exile, suffering from being away from their homes, and their families split up. If you think of the exile that people experience today in war-torn countries like Syria right now, where tens of thousands of people have had to flee their homes, going into exile into other countries with almost

Third Sunday of Advent
Zephaniah 3:14-18a
Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18
Full text of the readings

nothing -- it's terrible suffering.

Yet in the midst of something like that, there is Zephaniah, saying, "Cry out with joy, O daughter of Zion; rejoice O people of Israel! Sing joyfully with all your heart." How can this be? Or Paul -- here he is in jail in Ephesus. He's suffering. Jail anytime or place is an extreme experience of suffering, deprivation. Certainly in the time of the Roman Empire, when Paul was in one of those jails subject to the Roman authority, he was suffering.

In fact, he was also very ill and close to death. Yet again, he says, "Rejoice. Again I say it, rejoice always." What's the clue that explains this? What's behind this ability of Zephaniah calling out to the people in exile and Paul exhorting the Philippians from his own experience of terrible suffering to experience the joy he experiences? In both cases, it seems pretty much to be the same. In the case of Zephaniah, a little bit further on, he's telling the people after he exhorts them to joy: "Do not be afraid or let your hands tremble, for God your God is within you."

Your God is within you. He's asking them to turn in and experience the presence of God in their hearts and spirit. In what seems an almost unbelievable way to talk about God, Zephaniah says, "God will jump for joy on seeing you. For God has revived God's love. For you, God will cry out with joy." Experience God, a God of joy and a God of love. Even in the midst of their suffering, it's possible for them to know joy.

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To understand what going beyond joy is, Paul tells the church at Philippi not only to rejoice and for the same reasons Paul says to them, "The Lord is near. The Lord is near." What he means when he talks about the Lord, he's talking about the risen Jesus. Jesus has overcome suffering and death. He has passed through to new life. Jesus, the Son of God in power, the Lord, is near. So that's why Paul says, "Rejoice, and when you do, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

So during this season of Advent, today during this liturgy, we're exhorted to be aware that God is within you, God is within me. The Lord Jesus, the risen Christ, the Son of God in power, our brother in every way except sin, fully human but also now the Lord, is near. If we reflect a little bit further about who this Lord is, we find, first of all, deeper reasons why we should be joyful, but also a challenge. When those people to whom John was preaching began to ask him, "What shall we do?"

He explains what they should do in terms of the very preaching of Jesus, what will become the most significant radical teachings of Jesus. Listen to what John says when the people ask, "What are we to do?" "If you have two coats, give one to the person who has none; and if you have food, more than you need, do the same -- give it away." It's the beginning of the teaching of Jesus where later he cries out to the people and all of us, "Avoid greed in every form. Come to understand that everything you have is a gift from God."

So if you have more than you need, it really belongs to those who are in desperate need, because as we know so well, God made the world for all, not for a few, and everyone has a right to a full human life, to benefit from these gifts that God gave for all. John is telling the people at that time, "If you have two coats, give one away. If you have extra food, give it away." Begin to share. That will be your response to the fact that Jesus is near and guiding you in how to experience joy even in the midst of difficulties or sufferings.

Listen to what he says to the soldiers, "Do not use force of any kind or threaten the people." Jesus came into the world proclaiming that we must reject violence in any circumstance whatsoever. Even at the beginning, when John is first exhorting the people to come in, to be baptized as a preparation for Jesus, John begins to teach them what Jesus will later take up and proclaim dramatically and powerfully not only by his words, but by the way he himself lived.

To be ready for this presence of Jesus in our hearts and our spirits, we have to begin to change our lives, to begin to be like Jesus, to reach out, and then we will experience more deeply the presence of Jesus within our own hearts. As we also reflect more deeply on the Gospel today, we might notice how John is rather harsh: "You brood of vipers! How will you escape when divine punishment comes?" He tells them the ax is already laid to the root of the tree.

Every tree that failed to produce good fruit will be cut down, thrown into the fire. Look ahead to Jesus. He doesn't come into our midst denouncing, threatening and so on. Jesus' first contact was with tax collectors. It was not to exhort them to honesty, but to call them to be disciples. Levi was a tax collector: "Come follow me." Then to have meals with them, with these public sinners, so much so that Jesus will be called a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. This is the Jesus who comes into our midst. Jesus' way of bringing people to God is very different from John's. John's way has its place, but Jesus' way is much more attractive and ultimately more fruitful. Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man who has come, and these are his words, "to seek and to save the lost." So Jesus eats with sinners, tells parables of a God who searches for them when lost.

Where John urges acts of conversion and repentance as a condition for communion with God, Jesus practices communion as a prelude to a deep experience of God's love. Jesus calls us to himself, sinner that we might be. Jesus wants to be with us to share with us his love, to heal us, to help us to follow him. Today, then, as we celebrate Gaudete Sunday -- Rejoice Sunday -- we can indeed rejoice and respond to Paul's cry, "Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!"

And to Zephaniah's cry to the people, "Rejoice!" because both of them make it clear God is within us; God is in your midst. The Lord Jesus, Son of God in power comes to us if we open ourselves, if we let ourselves experience this Jesus who calls us to communion, who welcomes us even as we are, we will begin to know that in the midst of our difficulties, our sufferings, whatever they are, we can know joy.

We can experience that joy that Paul exhorts us to experience. Zephaniah calls us to be people of joy and to cry up with joy, "Rejoice, O people of Israel." If we open ourselves to Jesus, we will know that joy. Finally, too, as Paul tells us in writing to the Christians at Philippi, "Because the Lord is near, Jesus is with you. Then the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Not only will we know joy, we will have a deep sense of peace. This is the gift we prepare for as we try to make ourselves ready to celebrate the new coming of Jesus into our midst in this season of Advent and at Christmas.

[Homily given at St. Leo Church, Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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