

Advent 3, Year C December 17, 2006 Cathedral Church of Saint Paul

At the beginning of a familiar story that some of you have recently read (or will soon be reading) to your young ones, the nephew greets his uncle cheerfully, “A merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you?” His uncle, the notorious Ebenezer Scrooge, responds with his trademark sneer, “Bah! Humbug!” Then he demands of his nephew, “What right do you have to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You’re poor enough.”

The nephew parries his uncle’s thrust with this good-natured response: “What right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose? You’re rich enough!” As we all know, in the course of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge gets a hard lesson about where joy and happiness really are to be found.

Were he here today, old Scrooge would surely come down with laryngitis trying to “humbug” all the invitations to rejoice that are extended in this liturgy for the third Sunday of Advent (which in the past was called Gaudete—“rejoice” Sunday). Yet perhaps Scrooge’s sneer should be taken seriously. Maybe we should give some thought to his questions and ask ourselves, “What right DO we have to be merry?” Joy is unquestionably the byword of the day, but is it a realistic possibility in our lives? Do we have any reason to rejoice?

This is rejoicing Sunday. Right in the middle of the Advent waiting game, we take time out to take delight in what we are waiting for. Zephaniah strikes the tone in the first reading. Things were turned upside down, and looked at from God’s point of view. A time of grace, a time of rejoicing, anticipating when God would live with his people. “The Lord your God is in your midst. A warrior who gives victory, he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love.”

Then it happened: God did break into human affairs—physically, by becoming human. And all humanity should have rejoiced, but only a few shepherds did because the rest of the people were busy about many important things, and did not even notice a little baby was being born.

And that is about the way it has been ever since. Even when we know He is coming, even when we set aside a special time of preparation, we fill it with cards, shopping, and presents (all nice things) but we forget it is all for that little baby.

Once in a while, someone remembers—like Paul, who just could not get over the fact that Jesus was born and was coming again. He kept repeating: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.” And the people did for a while, and then they forgot again.

Why do people forget certain things, even when they are reminded? Because they do not really hear them. But once in a while, someone did hear. Once in a while there was a

simple soul, like Paul, with a clean heart, who knew who he was by the grace of God. Therefore, he was not threatened by a man who acted like God or by God who acted like a man. He was prepared to handle anything, so he was able to hear everything.

Once in a while a hearer does come along. So, honest to God, on the chance there is one among us, let me say it simply, “the Son of God is a man. He lives among us, with us, in us.”

Joy is suffering transformed. A contemporary theologian has described joy as the “burning of suffering, making it the fuel for our labor of sharing ecstasy.” His point seems to be that our sorrows and tribulations can provide part of the energy for our tasks of love and compassion in the world. This view of things is obviously central to the whole Christian message. Suffering and joy are seen as part of the same powerful dynamic.

While much in our culture teaches us that joy must be the opposite pole of suffering, the Christian gospel constantly reaffirms that joy is IN suffering, BEFORE suffering, and AFTER suffering. Isaiah asserts that “God is the joy of my soul,” yet we are also reminded in this season of Advent that our God is one who comes to us as a suffering savior, born in a stable and destined for the cross.

God’s joy touches our lives even now. It has been said, “that we learn in suffering what we teach in song.” Just a few days from now our songs of the season will be full of rejoicing and good cheer. Today’s Advent message anticipates that mood and reminds us that this proclamation of joy is hard earned. We are told that it is the lowly, the brokenhearted, the prisoners, the hungry and the poor who are the recipients of these “glad tidings.” Is it so strange, then, that God’s joy should touch us even in the midst of our suffering!

God and divine joy are present even in suffering, and it is most fitting that the Church should virtually COMMAND us to rejoice in this season of the year and in this Eucharist. Think about that name we have heard so much often in the recent weeks: Emmanuel. God-with-us. It signifies the Lord’s joy touching our lives, the kingdom of God breaking into human reality RIGHT NOW. Because of this we rejoice and render constant thanks, even in the face of suffering that remains a part of our lot on earth. It is not surprising, then, that when Scrooge does find a living example of true happiness and the real Christmas spirit, it is in the home of poor Bob Cratchit and his physically afflicted son. Out of just such suffering true joy is born.

That is fantastic, I know, but we can handle it. A God-man takes a bit of getting used to. That is why he started small: so he would have grown on us.

So there is something to rejoice about after all. AMEN.