

Third Sunday - Advent - Cycle C

Bloopers are things that make us laugh, but they weren't meant to be funny. We all make our share of bloopers...Even church bulletins do. Here are some real gems from actual church bulletins:

- *Tuesday evening at 6, there will be a bean soup supper in our parish hall. Music will follow. That's a concert I don't want to hear.*
- *Jane Smith has volunteered to strip...& refinish the cupboards in the sacristy. I hope she keeps the door closed*
- *A new loudspeaker system has been installed in the church. John Martin donated it in memory of his wife. (wooh,...I'm not sure she appreciated that tribute)*
- *(My favorite) Our men's weight-watchers group meets this Tues at 7pm in the church basement. Please enter through the double doors...You just can't make up this stuff.*

I thought it would be good for us to laugh a little because the 3rd Sun of Advent is traditionally called "Rejoice" Sunday...On Rejoice Sunday, we light the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath,... & our readings remind us of the basic mystery of our faith,... that even as we wait & prepare for the Lord's coming, we have great reason to rejoice because He is already here with us.... Listen again to the words of the prophet Zephaniah in our 1st reading: "Shout for joy...The Lord your God is in your midst," ...& St. Paul in the 2nd reading: "Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again - rejoice...The Lord himself is near."...And we sang these words as our psalm response: "Cry out with joy and gladness; for among you is the Great and Holy one of Israel."

Yes, Christ is here & alive among us,...here in this church & *as He promised* wherever two or more of us gather to pray....He is here speaking to us in Sacred Scripture....He is here & alive in the poor, the sick,...the imprisoned... He is here alive on this altar in the consecrated bread & wine. He is alive inside us when we receive Him into our very own bodies.... Christ is here with us - within us....On Rejoice Sunday, we have every reason to laugh, to rejoice & to sing for joy...Don't we?

I'll bet more than a few of us here are not feeling very joyful right now...Hmm?...It'd be easier to rejoice if things were going a little better wouldn't it?...It's hard to be joyful when you're struggling with troubles – your own or someone you care about...Work trouble, ...money trouble,...health trouble. ...relationship trouble,...parent trouble,...kid trouble,...grade trouble,...car trouble...you name it...all God's children got troubles...And it sure doesn't help living in a fallen, broken world....We had a heartbreaking reminder of that last Friday when twenty children, babies, were senselessly gunned down while at school doing what kids are supposed to do...It seems there are times when the Bible's call to rejoice is out of synch with what's happening in our lives & in the world..., Maybe it's because we usually think of "joy" & "happiness" as being the same thing ...But when the Bible talks about joy, it's different. ...Biblical joy is not the same as happiness.

Let me explain... Happiness depends on external circumstances. ..My happiness depends on what's happening to me and the world around me....If good things are happening to me...& to the people I care about, I feel good...I'm happy....When something bad happens...I don't feel happy. ...Happiness is an emotion; we can't control it...

Joy, on the other hand, doesn't depend on what's happening; joy comes from inside me... Joy comes from my relationship with Jesus Christ... It comes from believing deep in my soul that He is constantly in my life....Our joy comes from believing Jesus when He said that no matter what is happening in our lives – good or bad - He would be right there smack in the center of it...It's this faith & trust in Jesus Christ that will help us be joyful when things don't go as we planned,...so that even when we are not happy about our circumstances,...we can still

rejoice because He is with us... Joy is not an emotion; it's a choice – an attitude that says “as long as I've got the Lord, I can handle this.”

That's how it was for Zephaniah & Paul. They didn't write the words we just heard while they were on a beach sipping pina colodas... Zephaniah was writing during the anguish of the Jewish exile, when his people were captive in a foreign land...Paul was writing from a Roman prison cell, bound in chains...Neither one of them was happy about their desperate circumstances, but they wouldn't let it rob them of joy,... because their joy sprang from a deep belief that no matter how bad things got, God was close at hand,.. God would give them the strength to endure,.. God would eventually make things better, set things right...So they could say to their people, “Don't be discouraged; don't be anxious. ... Things look dark right now, but rejoice, for the Lord is with us. ”...This message is also meant for us today...We need to hear it, especially when life comes crashing down on us...The parents of those innocent murdered children need to hear it, and to believe that in their unspeakable pain, God is with them...God is hurting with them...God is crying with them, just as He did when His innocent Son was murdered.

Now, when God's Word calls us to rejoice always,... to be joyful always,...is God telling us we should go dancing in the streets & pretend that everything in our life is going great, when it isn't? ...No, God doesn't expect us to be happy with the trials & troubles that come down on us...What God does want is for us to find joy in knowing that He is near,..He hasn't abandoned us...we're not alone ...He will help get us through them... if we trust Him...My favorite Bible verse is from Rom 8:28: “ALL things work for good, for those who love God”...St. Paul is telling us that if we love God,...trust God, then everything that happens – no matter how bad it might be – will end up doing some good...Maybe not the way we wanted...but God will always make some good come from it....If we believe that - I do because I've seen it proven over & over - if we believe that,...then we should choose JOY – a joy that shines through in our gratitude & confidence that the Lord is always at work for good in our lives.

As a chaplain at Rochester General Hospital. I once visited a man twice a week over a period of 8 months. ...Mike was only 56, but he was in the grip 5 or 6 serious ailments that made him a prisoner in his bed...Every time the doctors got a handle on one of them,...another one would flare up more life-threatening than the first. ..Now as a man of deep faith, Mike's way of dealing with his extremely critical condition was not to complain or feel sorry for himself or be anxious or afraid...Instead he chose JOY....He chose to rejoice in the good rather than dwell on the bad. ...Every time I walked into his hospital room, I'd ask, “Mike, how are you doing today?”...And he'd say, “Deacon Ron, God gave me another day...so I can't complain...My wife is at my side...the nurses are taking good care of me...the doctors are doing everything they can...With the Lord's help, I'm taking it one day at a time...How are you doing?”...It's been two yrs since Mike died peacefully in that bed that was his home for 8 months,...& I think of him often, especially when I need to be reminded that –no matter how bad things get – our God has given us so many reasons to rejoice – to choose joy.

My friends, joy is a tool God gives us to overcome our circumstances, to give us the power to rise above the pain & the sorrows of this life...But one of the greatest obstructions to joy is sin... It's difficult to rejoice in God's presence & God's goodness when our relationship with God & with others is strained, maybe broken, because of our sin...The remedy for sin is always the same – sincere repentance. ...The path back to joy is to admit our sin, ask for forgiveness, and promise to make the changes we know God wants us to make...Tomorrow we will have an opportunity to do this as a community and individually at either of two Advent Penance services...Check out Fr. Ed's bulletin column to learn more about these services & about the abundant graces they offer...& be prepared to leave the Penance Service brimming with joy...Maybe you'll even feel like dancing in the streets.

Ok, so the message we need to remember as we journey through Advent to the glorious joy of Christmas day,...is that we have great reason to rejoice RIGHT NOW, for the Lord our God is here with us;... our Lord who loves us with all of our flaws and weaknesses;.. our Lord who forgives us and lifts us up when we fall;... our Lord who wants our hearts to rejoice not because we're free of trouble and tears, but because we're free of any fear that we are alone.... Our Lord who feeds and strengthens us as He will in a few moments with His Body and Blood;... our Lord who – for reasons we can never understand - wants you and me to spend eternity with Him so much so that He willingly went to the cross so that the gate to Heaven would be open to us...(I hope it has double doors so we'll have no trouble getting in)...My Friends, what more could we ask for; what more reasons do we need to rejoice? AMEN!