

Third Midweek in Advent/December 19, 2018  
Zep 3:14-20/Rejoice!  
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church  
Deacon Jerry Stobaugh

“Rejoice and exult with all your heart...”

Last Sunday was Gaudete Sunday which get its name from the Epistle reading for that day, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice.” In tonight’s Old Testament reading we again have the theme of rejoicing. It must be important then for us to rejoice, but do we do so always?

Human emotions are vulnerable to drastic changes at a moment’s notice. One minute a person is up, the next they are down. Circumstances shape feelings and no one is able to completely control their emotions. How then can God demand we rejoice?

Jesus Himself was not always joyful. He wept for Lazarus. At Gethsemane, He was troubled and deeply distressed, [Luke 21:44] “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” Thus, surely we have permission to be sorrowful at times, if our sinless Savior also was sorrowful.

It is appropriate to be sad in the right circumstances. As it says in Ecclesiastes [Ecc 3:4], there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

Let’s face it, the life of a Christian is not easy. Each believer is called to carry a cross and it is not a nice, plush, soft cross. It is hard and harsh, with sharp splinters and nails. Christians are crucified to the world and to their sinful flesh, and crucifixion is never pleasant, but rather filled with pain, suffering, and death.

How can we rejoice as we carry our cross? Are we to laugh at pain and dance at death?

Some Christians try to use this passage to shape the entire Christian life in an extreme manner. We are not to weep at funerals, they say, nor should we ever be sad under any circumstances. We are not to be down in the dumps at any time, or else there is something wrong with us. If we are sad, then we are not good Christians, they say.

I pray you are quick to see the error in this approach, because it elevates our emotions to a good work that earns status before the Father. Only Christ earns us status. A happy-sappy religion will rob the cross of its glory. For if we are not grievous sinners, then from what did Christ release us?

Yet the command is still there, rejoice. How are we feeble sinners, living in this veil of tears, to drag out of us a perpetual emotion of joy? How are we to ignore our cross and our trials and the shadow of death that falls upon us? How are we to rejoice?

The key is in the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord and what He is doing. We do not rejoice by our strength. We do not rejoice by summoning up an undefeatable optimism from our heart. We do not rejoice by anything in ourselves. We rejoice in the Lord.

It will help for us to remember who the Lord is. He is Christ Jesus, true God from all eternity, and also true Man, born of the blessed Virgin. He is our Lord because, as Dr. Luther wrote, He “has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.”

He is our Lord because He has given us salvation. He bought us to be His own. He ransomed us from the grave. We are His.

When Christ sorrowed in Gethsemane, He was facing a burden we will never bear. He was facing the condemnation and rejection of His own Father upon the Cross. Jesus knew He would suffer for the sins of the whole world. We will never face that kind of suffering. We think our problems on earth are huge, but they are nothing compared to the suffering of Christ. He writhed in agony upon the Tree, so we would never receive that punishment.

In our trials, we are not facing the punishment of God. Jesus has forever removed from us the divine wrath. Instead, we are receiving the loving discipline of our dear Father in heaven. We are being tested and strengthened by His loving hand. No discipline feels good at the time. But all things, we are assured, work out for our good. Every sorrow is used by God to benefit us. Besides, these trials, hard as they seem in life, cannot compare to the glory that is to be revealed.

All this is because of the Cross and Empty Tomb. The Savior took the sting of death away. He is the death of death. More than that, death is turned into a friend who leads us to Paradise. So there really is no serious cause for sorrow and despair in our lives.

Rejoice in the Lord, because our Lord overflows with the riches of His grace. He pours out to us a flood of blessings, from the sweet waters of Holy Baptism, to His Holy Absolution, to the Lamp of His Word as it is proclaimed and preached, to the Communion of His holy Body and Blood. Since His Gospel comes to us so richly, how can we despair? How can we hang our heads like defeated criminals when we are declared to be the saints of the Most High God?

But we saints are at the same time also sinners. By nature, we do not fear, love, and trust in God as we should. Our flesh is constantly trying to lead our eyes away from God. The devil tricks us into

focusing only upon our troubles. We dwell upon them and we wallow in them.

It is similar to something that happens every Christmastime. Many people in this season experience depression. Even though they are surrounded by colorful light and festive music and the loving presence of family and friends, inside they are deeply sorrowful. In the same way, we saints have every reason to rejoice at every moment, since even our most serious problems are overcome by Christ. Yet inside, we are sometimes deeply sorrowful. We sometimes allow our flesh to trick us into living as if we were defeated, rather than triumphant in Christ.

Our sinful eyes keep straying away from the Cross. But the more we see the Cross, as we hear the Gospel and as we recall our Baptism and as we taste the Eucharist, the more we receive His salvation, the more our eyes are trained to look to Him, not ourselves.

As we look to Him, we receive forgiveness for all our failures to rejoice. We have despaired, we have failed to live as joyful saints. But the Blood of Christ speaks on our behalf. It declares us innocent and perfect.

It is true our earthly troubles are very real and painful. We will wince and ache and weep from time to time. But they are only temporary tears. Even as we shed them, we are taught by Christ to remember His grace. He is our Lord, not these trials and tribulations. They cannot command us or own us.

Even your worst tears on earth are colored by joy and hope. For a Day is coming and soon will be here when every tear will be wiped away. You will rejoice every moment of every day, in that endless day which has no night, forever and ever. Deo Gratis! Thanks be to God!