

# *Adult Faith Formation - Advent Series*

## *Week Three: Joy*



### *Opening Prayer*

Heavenly Father, this third week of Advent, let us remember that the good news of Jesus' birth has the power to bring us great joy this Christmas season. Our joy isn't dependent on the people around us, the events in our lives, or the world around us. It doesn't depend on the gifts we give or the gifts we find under the tree. No earthly thing can ever take away our joy because joy comes from you. Fill us with the joy that flooded the hearts of the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, the hosts of heaven, and Mary and Joseph on Christmas Day. It is this same joy that still has the power to overwhelm our hearts with rejoicing. Father, help us to see the joy of Christ in your world, Amen.

*Guiding Scripture -*  
Zephaniah 3:14-20

### *Introductory Question -*

Focus on verse 15 "*The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has cast out your enemies. The King of Israel is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more.*" Why do we struggle to live as if our enemy has been cast out and we are to fear evil no more?

## *Reflection on Joy*

During the first two weeks of Advent, we have been exploring the virtues of Faith and Hope and how we can strengthen them to a state of permanence in our lives. The more we learn to put our faith and hope in God, the stronger those virtues become in us. We are never disappointed because God never changes, He never gives up on us or stops loving us. In this way, these virtues become stronger as our trust in God's goodness and our belief in His love for us increase.

### *A Lived Expression of Faith and Hope*

Similarly, joy is an extension of these virtues. It is the lived expression of our faith and hope. Oftentimes when we look at the lives of fellow believers, what we see is not so much a visible faith, but a visible joy which we know can only come from a true faith in God. This joy stands out to us as it becomes more paradoxical - the more unfortunate a person's circumstance may be, the more visible their joy becomes.

But what exactly is joy? It is not an emotion. Although many equate joy with happiness, this is not a true understanding. We see joy in the lives of those who suffer, a smile on the face of one who is starving. When happiness flees away, joy can remain, as

emotions come and go with the wind, joy abides. And yet, joy is not a toxic positivity. It is not lying to oneself or attempting to convince others that life is easy when it is hard, or circumstances are ideal when they are not.

### *A Fruit of the Spirit Grounded in Truth*

Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, a visible sign in a person's life that they have welcomed the Spirit of the Lord into their heart. Jesus tells us that we will know a tree by its fruit (Luke 6:43-45). For this reason, joy, among the other fruits, is one of the first things we should recognize in the life of a Christian, and the first thing others should recognize in us. Joy comes from the Lord, and as with faith and hope, our joy can be steadfast in Him. True joy comes from living out the truth of Christ saving action on the cross (Phil 4:4). We rejoice always because, as Christians, we live into the truth that nothing could ever change God's redemption.

*"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."*

Luke 6:43-45

**God has redeemed us,  
Our debt has been paid,  
Our enemy has been crushed,  
And we have been bought at a price we could never repay,  
A price we will never be asked to repay in full,  
For God asks nothing but our faith, our trust, our love, and ultimately, our lives.  
The war is won, but the battle rages on.  
We rejoice in His victory.**

No matter the circumstances we find, the evil at play in the world, or the time we have left to wait before our final fulfillment, God has redeemed us. In this we can rejoice always, knowing that nothing could ever separate us from this love, and nothing could ever change our status in God's eyes. We were worth dying for, in this we find our identity, and in this we rejoice.



*Flight into Egypt by Gentile de Fabriano*

### *A Path to Redemptive Suffering*

Our joy roots us in truth and gives us strength to endure suffering. In this truth we find a new capacity for our struggles. We unite our suffering to the cross of Christ, to be offered to the Father, to be used as a sacrifice for His greater glory. And in this, we are joyful, knowing that nothing we endure is wasted. John 16:20-22 references women in childbirth. They almost forget their pain as soon as their baby is laid in their arms. They know they don't suffer in vain, and they are filled with joy at the thought of the cause. So too can we be filled with heroic joy in the face of hardship, knowing that we do not suffer in vain when we unite our suffering to Christ's.

*"Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has sorrow because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So, you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."*

John 16:20-22

But this is not easy. Joy is not for the faint of heart. The evil one tempts us with temporary pleasure and seeks to pass it off as joy, but sooner or later, we know that pleasure fails. What God offers us is difficult, but in time we see that a life lived for God under His law is worth more than gold. Psalm 19:7-10 gives us this wisdom and leads us to joy.

*"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, ever much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb."*

Psalm 19:7-10

## *Discussion Questions:*

- 1) Think of the joyful people in your life. What are the visible hallmarks of joy in their life?
- 2) The world conflates joy with pleasure. If we know that God's law will bring us to joy and fulfillment, why does it so often seem unattractive?
- 3) How can we be joyful amid suffering or hardships? What does that look like?
- 4) Joy is not always felt, but when it is, we acknowledge that experience as a gift from God. Have you ever experienced the joy of God and what was that experience like for you?

## *Weekly Challenge:*

Spend time in prayer this week with paragraph 12 from Pope Francis's encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel).

*Jesus is "the first and greatest evangelizer." In every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit. The real newness is the newness which God himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways. The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that 'he has loved us first' (1 Jn 4:19) and that he alone 'gives the growth' (1 Cor 3:7). This conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us.*

## *Closing Prayer: The Magnificat*

My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. He looks on his servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed. The Almighty works marvels for me. Holy his name. His mercy is from age to age, on those who fear him. He puts forth his arm in strength and scatters the proud-hearted. He casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly. He fills the starving with good things, sends the rich away empty. He protects Israel, his servant, remembering his mercy, the mercy promised to our fathers, to Abraham and his sons for ever. Amen.