

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler
The Second Sunday of Advent (C)
Sunday, November 4, 2018

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Philippians 4:4-7 | Luke 3:7-18

A few weeks ago, on the Saturday morning right before the first Sunday in Advent, I had the pleasure of being back at St. John's McLean, my sending parish, to lead an Advent Quiet morning. I arrived early and wandered into their sanctuary where members of the altar and flower guilds were putting the finishing touches on their Advent wreath. After happy hugs we entered into a meaningful conversation about the wreath, mostly focused on the candles. "When do we get to light the pink one?" one woman asked. "It's the special one right, remind us what it stands for?" another lady chimed in. So as we gathered around their beautiful, freshly-formed Advent wreath, early that cold Saturday morning, we remembered together the significance and profound meaning the pink candle carries.

Christian communities across the globe, including ours, have indeed arrived at the third Sunday in Advent and now, now we can light that pink, or rose colored, candle. And it is indeed very special! So let us remember and recall the story – why today's candle is a different shade of violet, why we wait to light the special pink candle, and the significance it might hold for our journey to the manger in Bethlehem.

The name for the third Sunday in Advent offers us the first clue about its meaning: Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* from the Latin word for rejoice. And so just as Christmas, the birth of the Christ child, just as the Lord, draws ever nearer, we are explicitly directed towards rejoicing this Sunday. The root of the word rejoice is of course joy and so the simplest way to think about the pink candle is that it stands for joy. In fact, if children remember nothing else about Advent, many remember, from one year to the next, that the pink candle means joy.

But what kind of joy, and even more pointedly, why joy in this predominantly penitential season of preparation? Paul makes reference to the kind of joy the pink candle represents when he writes to his dear friends in Philippi: *"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 made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

It is important to remember that Paul wrote his Philippians letter, issued this exhortation to rejoice, from the cell of a dark Roman prison. And so we must acknowledge and respect that Paul is referencing a joy much deeper and more intense than mere happiness, or a sunny outlook, or merriment. Clearly the joy the pink candle reminds us of, calls us back into remembering, is much more profound than happiness and cheerfulness.

I, for one, find it both challenging and a relief that the joy we reflect on today is complex, because our lives are complex and our world is increasingly complex. And in a culture that often seems obsessed with acquiring or conjuring up happiness there is a real desire, even hunger, for a deeper more substantive joy. The kind of joy that somehow contains both the experience of suffering and healing,

the kind of joy that understands that fear is usually the predecessor of hope, the kind of joy that holds pain and sorrow alongside peace and concord. The kind of joy that forgives sins, and binds up wounds, and wipes away tears and brings us to a humble straw-filled manger to meet the King of Glory.

Paul's joy is no simple naive joy and we give thanks for and remember that on this day because we are in desperate need of complex and intense joy.

I posed another question alongside asking what kind of joy the pink candle describes and that second question was wondering why joy in the first place, why joy? There are many other positive experiences we could lift up as we prepare for Christmas and then celebrate Jesus' birth – hope, trust, patience, humility, fidelity, serenity, deliverance – the list goes on. But we lift up joy. Joy is the predominant, preeminent Christmas theme. Joy – it's a little word, just three letters. Perhaps no other Christmas carol is anticipated more than *Joy to the World*. Second to that is *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* – where we proclaim: "Joyful all ye nations rise." So why joy? Why are we being warmed up for joy with our pink candle?

Again Paul serves as our guide. He rejoices because, as he says later in his letter: "The Lord is near." And this too, friends, is the heart of the pink candle and the very heart of our Advent preparation. The Lord is near. That the Lord is near is truly good news for you, and for me, we who are desperately trying to remember the Good News that God is victorious. That love triumphs over hate, that God can and will redeem our individual and collective brokenness, and that death does not have the final say.

So, no matter how many times we have experienced celebrating the birth of Jesus, no matter how many times we recall the angels, and shepherds, and kings racing to the end of the world, to that humble stable – we experience joy, joy every time. Joy that the Lord is near and that God has the strength to hold everything, all the good and all the bad we create and then try to fix. And as we give thanks for our pink candle, we do so remembering that the Lord is near, so very near, and therefore we must "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*" Amen.