

“Advent Joy”

Today is the third Sunday of Advent and it is called “Joy Sunday.” Traditionally, the candle for the third Sunday on the Advent wreath is pink.

Advent is a time for preparation and expectation for the celebration for Christmas. It’s a time for waiting as we are reminded to “wait” for the second coming of Jesus. It’s a time for us to turn around, as John the Baptist called people to do so over two thousand years ago, and prepare our hearts, minds and souls to accept again the true message of Christmas, God with us, Emmanuel.

Joy Sunday comes after midway through Advent to symbolize that joy and gladness of Christmas: Christ the Child was born for us; God’s love was shown in his birth; God’s promise of salvation came through.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and theologian describes the difference between joy and happiness. While happiness is dependent on external conditions, joy is “the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing -- sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death -- can take that love away.” Thus joy can be present even in the midst of sadness.

Joy is the experience of knowing that we are unconditionally loved and accepted by God and knowing that God is with us no matter what.

When we think of what Mary went through as the mother of Jesus, we can easily imagine that it was not a pleasant and easy experience.

She was soon going to be a bride. She was engaged to Joseph. Joseph was a thoughtful considerate young man. She must have been very happy and excited about her future with him. They were going to start a new life together as a couple. People in the town knew that they had been engaged and were wishing for their happy marriage.

It all changed when an angel appeared before Mary and told her that she was going to bear a son, whom she was to name “Jesus.” He would be a great figure and would even be called “the Son of the Most High.”

As she was thinking how this could happen to her since she had not had any sexual relationship to be pregnant, the angel told her that it would be all done by the power of the Holy Spirit.

How would Joseph believe her story? How would people in the town react to her pregnancy? Not with favor, of course!

The angel had addressed her as “Favored woman!” Is this a favored thing? Is this what happens to a favored person? What would happen to their engagement? Would Joseph be mad and disappointed with her? What would her future be ... their future be?

With all those uncertainties, without any answer given to those questions, which must have risen within her, Mary answered, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” What courageous faith she had!

Mary visited Elizabeth, who had become pregnant with John the Baptist in her old age by the Holy Spirit. When Elizabeth greeted her with joy and blessed her, Mary delivered her song of praise, which is called the Magnificat, which is today’s Gospel lesson.

“Oh, my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

How could she rejoice with all the uncertainties -- about her future, about her son’s, about Mary and Joseph’s future?

Joseph took Mary as his wife in spite of her pregnancy since an angel had appeared to him in his dream and told him to marry her since her pregnancy was caused by the Holy Spirit.

Although Joseph was a man of faith, was there not a time when he questioned what was happening to them? Was what they had heard from an angel true? Were they dreaming about it all? Was Mary telling the truth?

How did any doubt from Joseph or her own doubt, if there was any, affect Mary? In spite of any doubt and many uncertainties about their future, Mary praised God. “My soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!”

Joy is the experience of knowing that we are unconditionally loved and accepted by God and knowing that God is with us no matter what.

Mary knew that she was loved and accepted by God unconditionally in spite of her humanness and of any lack of faith. “He **took notice** of his lowly servant girl,” said Mary, “and from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

She was addressed as “***Favored woman***” by the angel and the angel said to her, “***The Lord is with you!***” (Luke 1:28)

Joy is the experience of knowing that we are unconditionally loved and accepted by God and knowing that God is with us no matter what.

You and I are favored ones, aren't we? God sent Jesus Christ to us to show us how “favored” we are and how unconditionally we are loved.

Jesus was the message, “*God with us,*” Emmanuel.

Certainly Mary was not in an optimal situation for having a child. And yet, when confronted with this shocking news, she did what all of us are called to do: she reached deep into her soul and found courage that came from a place beyond her own self, beyond her own limitations and fears. She found courage that came from her deep trust in God.

That's where, she found her joy. Out of her deep trust in God that God would take care of it all and do the best for her and for her loved ones, she found joy. My soul praises the Lord. How my spirit **rejoices** in God my Savior!

That's the joy God offers to us. God unconditionally loves and favors us. Nothing -- sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death -- can take that love away. God is with us, Immanuel.

May we receive that joy again today and in this season of Advent and Christmas.
Amen.