

Today is traditionally known as "Gaudete" Sunday. This is because the traditional introit (or opening psalm) for the day began with the Latin word for "Rejoice."

The official liturgical color for the Third Sunday of Advent also was rose. The change from purple to rose was intended to set this Sunday off as less solemn, and perhaps allow a relaxation in whatever disciplines might have been observed during the rest of Advent.

Perhaps you noticed how many times "rejoice" or "joy" appeared in today's readings and the psalm. In Isaiah we heard these words: "...I will greatly rejoice in the Lord." The theme of Psalm 126 (in your bulletin insert) is "joy." "Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy. Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves." The theme of Canticle known as the *Magnificat*, is joy. Mary, the girl chosen to be the mother of Jesus, says, "My spirit rejoices in God my savior." And finally, in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians we heard: "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

If we reflect on these passages, much can be said about joy and about the meaning of rejoicing, particularly as we attempt to live a Christian life on this 11<sup>th</sup> day of December 2011: when the economy is difficult for many people, when there political unrest and war in other parts of the world, when there is illness and even deaths of loved ones, when there may be other challenging circumstances or suffering in our lives.

1. Certainly, the first thing, which comes to me, is that **God is good**. Christians believe that there is always cause for rejoicing because of God's goodness. As we look around at the world, we see example after example of the goodness of God. The natural beauty of the earth, even the snow can be beautiful. Animals are part of God's goodness – the extent and diversity of the natural environment. And then human beings, created in the image of God. The marvel of human capabilities and creativity, all gifts of God, are indicators of God's goodness and cause for rejoicing. We very naturally rejoice in the beauty, the majesty, of all aspects of God's creation.
2. Another cause for rejoicing is the way in which **God has reached out** to humankind over the centuries; and in particular, for Christians, we rejoice because God called a people into a special relationship. The Old Testament is the story of how God reached out to the Israelites and made a covenant with them.
  - They were chosen to be God's people in order to show forth the goodness and righteousness of God to the whole world.
  - At their best, the children of Israel did just that. United under Kings David and Solomon, the Israelites' influence spread throughout a sizable portion of the ancient near east. During those glory years, Israel was a sovereign kingdom exercising control over a small empire.
    - Many of the psalms were composed and written down during that time.
    - The compiling of the Torah was begun during that time.
    - Then, during the reign of Solomon, the temple in Jerusalem was built. It was a sign in stone of the covenant relationship between the people of Israel and the Lord their God.
    - Rejoicing was the keynote during the dedication of that great building. We read in the First Book of Kings that after the dedication ceremonies, "[Solomon] sent the people away; and they blessed the king, and went to their homes joyful and glad of heart for all the goodness that the Lord had shown to David his servant and to Israel his people." (8:66)

- Later in Israel's history, even when things did not always go so well, God remained faithful to the people. A small group of the Hebrew people, a remnant, survived, and they were eventually able to return to Jerusalem and reclaim it as their own. Again, there was cause for much rejoicing among the Jews, among God's people.
3. Finally, we have our greatest cause for rejoicing with the coming of Jesus and the creation of the Church. Indeed, it continues to be true today. **The very fact that we gather here this morning**, able to hear God's word and celebrate the mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood is our deepest cause for rejoicing. It is both a cause for, and an expression of, our joy.
- All of us have known both good times and bad. WE may have known both salvation and suffering; and perhaps because we have known **salvation even in the midst of suffering and sorrow**, we can know that joy is independent from suffering.
  - For we are people of the cross, a people who believe in a God, born to be a suffering servant in the world, so that the same world might be saved. We rejoice because we are the people who participate each week in the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.
  - So today, we join with those early Christians in Thessalonica, and with believers in all times and all places, to be the people who "rejoice always," in spite of suffering, in spite of death, precisely because the world is saved through Christ, precisely because Jesus was born. As we await the celebration of the greatest of Birthdays, it is my prayer may we also proclaim in our hearts, the conviction of the words of the ancient introit for the Third Sunday of Advent: Gaudete! Rejoice! Amen.