

ADVENT 3

Year B

The Rev. Israel Alexander Portilla Gómez is a Colombian priest, and he serves as associate priest at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Diocese of Alaska. This sermon was translated from the original Spanish written for Sermones que Iluminan.

During Advent and Christmas, we will be using study prompts and other activities tied to the sermon for the week. Read the sermon aloud and follow-up with spoken responses to the two questions at the end. Find our full sermon compilation for individual, small group, or congregational use, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2023* at www.sermonsthatwork.org.

Rejoice Always

[RCL] *Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Canticle 15 (or 3); 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28*

We are already a week away from Christmas, and for good reason, this Sunday is called “Joy Sunday”. This is because of the exhortation given to us by St. Paul at the beginning of the reading from 1 Thessalonians: “Rejoice always.” And how are you today? If you feel some sadness, and today your faces were not ready to smile, it’s time to change your outlook. There is a greater joy flooding our hearts. That is the central message of today, because the celebration of the birth of our Savior is very near and his light shines in the darkness. Nothing can extinguish it. So, in our liturgy this Sunday, we use a pink candle to express the joy we feel for his coming, tender and fragile as a baby. And this pink candle, together with the other candles, announces the true light of which John the Baptist spoke.

So, the readings speak beautifully of how the promised Messiah is at the door. Let’s see.

In the first reading from the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes the coming of the Lord as “the oil of gladness instead of mourning.” He continues, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my

whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” That’s right, dear siblings, we are made righteous in our Lord, and we are glad because joy comes from him. Therefore, whenever we are conscious of the salvation that our Lord gives us, joy fills our lives. And we are joyful not because of our successes or achievements for the present day, but because God’s love is greater than all the pain and suffering that surrounds us. To be Christians is to spread the perfume of joy. Others can sense it and see it, and there is something more than ourselves filling our lives. And perhaps you have heard the famous phrase attributed to St. Francis de Sales: “A sad saint is a sorry saint.”

Thus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, in her calling to be the mother of our Lord, received this role with joy amid all the hardships she faced, which is why, in the Magnificat, we hear with joy: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” This exultation of Mary comes from the depths of her being, and thanks to her, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ has been made possible. Now all of us venerate the Mother of God as an example of holiness, faith and joy. She gave us an example of how, amid adversity, rejection, poverty, persecution, all the tears and uncertainty she had to face while carrying her child in her womb, she resolutely embraced the special plan that God had in store for her. Her attitude was an immense joy that endures forever: “From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.”

And we are participants in this happiness. We are blessed to know that God came to meet us as one of us, in the humblest way possible, so that

absolutely no one would be excluded. Jesus is the light that illuminates all darkness. John the Baptist was aware of this, which is why he announced, "Make straight the way of the Lord." And what is that way? That way is our minds and hearts. Let us open our own inner doors to meet with Jesus, with his presence, with his life, with the practice of his message.

And what happens next? The same thing that happened to Mary, Paul, John and many, many others, and is reported to us in today's readings: being filled with joy. This is the most evident sign of being happy. If we let our Lord Jesus Christ into our lives, we will feel true and lasting happiness. He himself was immensely happy, and no one has been as intensely happy as he was, and we know very well how he did not have it easy. Neither do we. But still, he was satisfied with what he did on earth and completed his plan of salvation for all, which does not end; it continues to be in progress, eternally. At first it seemed to have failed miserably, but God's plans do not go according to our human logic.

In history, we have read how many have spent their years thinking about happiness. Before Christ's appearance on Earth, Greek philosophers wrote treatises. Aristotle, more than 300 years before the birth of our Lord, said that happiness is the goal sought by every human being, and that desire guides all human actions. And no one seems to hesitate to agree with him.

You may have heard that every year there is a survey that measures the global happiness index. This year's result is already published, and it's up to you to look for the result. Some people want to go and live in the places ranked highly, because they would like to be happier. But there is a much simpler, more attainable, and more profound way to fill all our discontent: Invite Jesus into our lives. He is the endless source of happiness. And this *does not* rule out the difficulties that make us temporarily unhappy. But with him, we live in immense joy, in joy that elevates our lives with purpose.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the joy we are waiting for with the Birth of the Christ Child. He is our ultimate reason for existence. When we have God at the center, everything else makes sense. We exist thanks to him, we live in him, and we will go to him. His actions in us are summed up in infinite love, which brings forth good from within us. And his love transforms everything.

Therefore, let us be joyful, because the happiness that comes from God is unquenchable and extends beyond what we can imagine, beyond our limits, beyond what we could ever believe. Let us celebrate with joy this third Sunday of Advent and wait with smiling faces for the miracle of the manger. Amen.

Prompts

1. True and lasting joy can be found by inviting Jesus into our lives. How has your faith brought joy into your life? Can you share a specific experience or moment of joy related to your faith?

2. Where in the Magnificat do you hear Mary's joy? Is it tempered with fear and/or resolution? Can these feelings co-exist with joy?