

3rd Sunday of Advent “Gaudete Sunday is Good Medicine”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Today is Gaudete Sunday. Everything about this liturgy from the readings to the vestments to the candle we lit calls us to rejoice for the Lord is near. That is what Gaudete means. It is a word that calls us to rejoice. We rejoice that the Lord will appear at the end of days and we rejoice that Jesus’ birthday is near. On the other hand, I will be the first to admit that any message reminding me that Christmas is near can cause me anxiety, perhaps even a panic attack. There is so much to do and so little time to do it in. Have you ever felt that way a couple weeks before Christmas? This is why I love the theme for this Sunday. Gaudete Sunday is good medicine at this point in December to help us avoid becoming an Ebenezer.

For this Sunday of Advent, I want to share something Pope Francis said a few years back that I think is a helpful reminder this time of year. He said, “The joy of the Gospel is not just any joy. It consists in knowing one is welcomed and loved by God.” Perhaps that is as good a definition of salvation as any, knowing that we are welcomed, loved and redeemed by Jesus. It is a simple message, and yet central to what it means to be a Christian. Pope Francis also said something quite provocative. He said, “No one has ever heard of a sad saint with a mournful face. That would be a contradiction. The Christian’s heart is filled with peace because he knows how to place his joy in the Lord even when going through the difficult moments of life.” I think this is good advice for all of us this time of year.

In fact, I think this is what Isaiah was getting at in our first reading, centuries before Jesus was born. You see, Isaiah was thirsting for a savior for his people. He is expressing Israel’s hunger for God’s love and grace. Isaiah says in those days the desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom...the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf be cleared and the lame leap like a stag. Isaiah thirsts for God’s intervention into this world, for God’s love, his welcome and salvation. And so, following Isaiah we can ask ourselves: what areas in my life right now are blind and deaf to God’s love and welcome? What areas of my life right now feel paralyzed, unable to move in God’s direction right now? When we reflect on this, I think we are spiritually feeling what Isaiah is getting at in that first reading.

The people in Jesus’ day were also in that spiritual space. John the Baptist was arrested, thrown in prison and awaiting his death. John sends messengers to Jesus asking the question on everybody’s heart: “Are you the one?” Jesus responds with the prophet Isaiah, “the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised.” Emmanuel has visited his people, Emmanuel means God is with us. Emmanuel chose the name Jesus. The word Jesus literally means “God saves”. God is intervening in this world. God is welcoming us and showing his love for us in the person of Jesus Christ.

And this is a helpful message because I think we all feel the need God's welcome, love and salvation at times. We all have areas that are spiritually blind, deaf and lame, especially when faced with the broken relationships or loss in our lives, painful memories that we can't get rid of, or even a certain measure of paralysis that comes from the stress or grief that can take hold of us this time of year.

Christians, the invitation on Gaudete Sunday is to rejoice that God wants to give us a savior this holy season. This savior can give us new sight if we see the world through his eyes. This savior can give us new hearing if we listen to the words of scripture. This savior can give us spiritual mobility if we put into action the faith we believe. This savior can give us new life if we are feeling spiritually dead right now. On that note, this Tuesday evening, we will have our annual parish advent reconciliation service. This will be an opportunity to receive the savior's gift of love and new life by clearing our hearts of whatever sin that is weighing us down, keeping us from entering into the Christmas season with joy.

My friends, we have lit the rose candle. The invitation this Gaudete Sunday is to rejoice. Rejoice that we are not reeds blowing in the wind but disciples who have built their houses on spiritual rock. No matter what life throws at us, or how much we have to get done before Christmas, we remember to rejoice that God has demonstrated his love for us and has welcomed us into his life through Christ our Lord. Amen.