

Rejoice amidst Suffering Third Sunday of Advent/C December 13, 2015 9:00 AM
Zep 3:14-18a; **Phil 4:4-7**; Lk 3:10-18 (Those who are reborn in Baptism have a
birthright to an inner peace and joy.)

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice.”

It’s very important we always **get things in their proper context**. For example, think of the phrase you might read: “Oh my God.” What does that mean? It could express delight, disgust, or petition. What is it? Which is it? Well, it depends. What’s the context?

What’s the context of St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice”? You might imagine he is relaxing on a Greek isle in the Aegean sipping ouzo. But, no, he is actually in prison. **This is a letter from prison**. And one of the most remarkable characteristics of early Christian witness was the joy that Christians exhibited in chains or even facing death itself. In fact, this joy proved itself irresistible to many of the pagans in late antiquity. **So we see that the blood of martyrs became the seedbed of the Church because of this joy that Christians had in the face of torment and torture and death.**

Now how can this be? Most people have a tendency, I would say, most people naturally **identify with the circumstances of their lives**. So if circumstances are positive, then all is well; but if circumstances turn nasty, uncertain, hostile, or disruptive, then we are thrown into fear and/or anger, and/or anxiety. Then we cannot experience joy or contentment. This is why the witness of the martyrs had such an impact. What Paul is talking about is the realization that **those who are reborn in Baptism have a birthright to an inner peace and joy**, a birthright from the second birth that comes in Baptism. And **this does not come from circumstances surrounding one’s life, but from the Holy Spirit**, mentioned by John the Baptist. He says, “There is one coming who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit”—and this is it. This is what St. Paul is talking about, **the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, even if you’re in chains, even if you’re dying**.

No one needs to convince any of us that the world at present, even in our own country, has become increasingly unsettled and unsafe. Terrorism has disrupted the calm and complacency that we used to take for granted. In precisely such times **we need to be all the more aware of our birthright as children of God and siblings of Christ**. Do you think of yourself as a sibling of Christ? You are if you are baptized. If St. Paul could rejoice from his perch in prison, then we can rejoice in the uncertainty that has become so commonplace. We do not rejoice because **the world is experiencing such upheavals, but in spite of them. We can know God as an intimate companion**. And we must waste no time in **developing a deeper, more conscious relationship with God** if we are to experience this joy in darkness. This is especially the reason Jesus gave us the Eucharist. In the Mass we are joined sacramentally to **the paschal mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising. And in that mystery our own suffering, our own conflicts, our own pain finds meaning and companionship**.

Now what stands in the way of many of us finding God amidst uncertainty is the expectation found in modern culture only. I’ll have to repeat that: found in modern culture only, that it shouldn’t be; we shouldn’t have pain. We have a right to be secure and comfortable. But

suffering has always been a component of life on earth. The project of getting rid of pain, suffering, discomfort, or insecurity will simply always fail. We can influence things for the better; yes, we can and we should and we have. **We have made notable improvements basically in life, health, and well being on a physical plane. But there is an enormous problem that remains that no one has learned how to handle: the human heart itself.**

We read in the Book of Genesis that God gave humanity dominion over the earth, but **who has dominion over humanity?** That's the problem. **Each of us is a free agent who needs the truth to be free.** Well, how many people really have the truth? How many people have the truth that makes us free? It's shocking to realize how few. Not only do we need the truth that makes us free, **we need God to fill the void within us because that void is actually boundless, infinite.** And only an infinite God, only an infinite love can fill it. Nothing can substitute for God, and **nothing can substitute for the God shown us in Christ,** because the word "God" could mean lots of different things to lots of different people. And each could have maybe a little truth in it, but may not be the face that God presents us of himself in his Son Jesus of Nazareth. And anything that's out of shape in reference to the face of Jesus is out of shape in reference to the truth. So in this way you can see that **the heart and the mind of humanity is actually very, very precarious in this great age of knowledge and technology.** Knowledge and technology—they can't touch the real problem.

Human free will and our capacity for evil will continue to throw a wrench in anyone's plan for universal peace. Ultimately **peace will only come when God's Holy Spirit,** mentioned by John the Baptist, **dwells in the hearts of all people,** not some people, not a few people, not many people, but all people. That will be universal peace. We have to see the actual situation as it is.

St. Paul knew that getting Christ into the hearts of the world would entail all kinds of suffering, and he was willing to endure that with joy for the sake of God, for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of the gospel. Now like St. Paul, **we need to see this, our age, as the perfect time and this space, where we live, as the perfect place for us to carry out the work God has given us.**