

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (YEAR C)

December 12, 2021

Zephaniah 3:14–18a • Philippians 4:4–7 • Luke 3:10–18

I.

This week brought the annual staff Christmas party,
which is always a highlight for me.

We enjoyed a nice lunch together,
including a cup of Irish coffee.

We had decided as a staff to each take an ornament from the Giving Tree.

Then, by dictate of the rector,
there was caroling.

Daniel Sañez, our organist, led us in singing a medley of tunes.

The selections included “Deck the Halls,” “Jingle Bells,”
and two of my favorites: “What Child is This” and “Jingle Bell Rock.”

II.

According to one’s line of work,
things either are slowing down at this time of year,
or they’re picking up.

In the Church,
where things are always busy,
the pace approaches warp speed during Advent.

Even as the staff enjoyed our Christmas party,
we knew that it’s only a respite,
because things will get busier as December 25th approaches.

But for those few hours,
it was a lot of fun,
and even necessary.

III.

In the second reading,
from the Letter to the Philippians,
St. Paul issues a command:

“Rejoice in the Lord always,
I shall say it again: rejoice!
The Lord is near.”

For this reason,
the Third Sunday of Advent is also known as *Gaudete* or “Rejoice” Sunday.

So, today the pink candle in the Advent wreath is lit,
rose-colored vestments may be worn,
more flowers adorn the sanctuary,
and the music is more festive.

That phrase, “The Lord is near,”
refers to the proximity of Christmas:

Advent is now more than halfway over.

But the phrase “The Lord is near” has another meaning:

God is close to humanity—he is near to us—
because the Incarnation of his Son has already taken place.

Christ is “coming” but, of course, he’s already here;
he’s been here ever since he took flesh in the womb of Mary.

The “coming” of Christ means allowing his saving work to penetrate our lives,
so that they flourish, along the lines of the first reading:

“Shout for joy, O daughter Zion!
Sing joyfully, O Israel!
Be glad and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The LORD has removed the judgment against you
he has turned away your enemies;
the King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst.”

The Third Sunday of Advent captures the reality of salvation:
It is both something incomplete and something we already experience.

This principle is reflected in the Collect or opening prayer for today's Mass:

“O God, who see how your people
faithfully await the feast of the Lord's Nativity,
enable us, we pray,
to **attain** the joys of so great a salvation
and to **celebrate** them always
with solemn worship and glad rejoicing.”

When we participate in the Mass,
we experience Christ's work of salvation:
his passion, death, and resurrection.

We are drawn into it;
that holy sacrifice flows into our lives.

Whenever Mass is offered, the work of salvation is carried out.

God's grace moves us to respond to him,
so that what Christ has already done is now accomplished in us.

This is the message that John the Baptist proclaims in the Gospel:

“Christ is coming, so prepare well,
but he is not yet here—not fully.”

There is more for God to do;
there are more ways for us to respond to him.

“I am baptizing you with water,
but one mightier than I is coming. ...
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

The certainty that God is already among us,
and continuing to work in our lives,
is a reason to rejoice—
even though there is more to be done.

After today,
the preparations of Advent resume.

So, a thought:
We can echo the preaching of John the Baptist by helping others to prepare.

As Christmas approaches,
reach out to someone you know,
in your family or circle of friends,
who has been away from Mass.

Here at the Cathedral,
we're only at 60 percent of the Mass attendance we had before the pandemic.

There's more work to be done.

If you know of someone who's been away from church,
ask how he or she is doing.

Tell the person about your experience of Mass,
and what it means to you.

Avoid browbeating, guilt-tripping, passing judgment, or condemning.

Instead, offer to accompany someone to Mass.

If the person declines, not to worry:
remember that, like John the Baptist,
you're preaching good news.

IV.

The celebration of Christmas is approaching,
and Christ is already here.

The nearness of the feast points to the closeness of God.

“Rejoice in the Lord always,
I shall say it again: rejoice!”