

Even though the words of the song tell us, “*Tis the season to be jolly...*”, physicians tell us there are more cases of depression and cardiac arrest in December than any other time of year. They believe it most probably is due to anxiety, the stresses of shopping, spending, preparation for family gatherings, and perhaps escalated by excessive levels of Christmas cheer, such as grown-up Egg Nog. *‘Tis the season to be jolly, but also ‘tis the season to feel anxious and over-burdened.*

We see commercials of happy families enjoying lots of gifts and holiday foods, while we are confronted with the reality of those we know who are struggling financially. The season calls us to jump into the crowd at the mall to buy gifts, but the thought of spending beyond our means causes anxiety.

This season is built on the joys of being with family, yet some of us have lost loved ones in this past year and are facing these losses in a new way or for the first time. And of course, many people live alone or are estranged from families.¹

Advent, with its contrasting experiences, can leave us feeling conflicted. Today’s readings perpetuate this contrast: St. Paul tells us, “*Rejoice*” and Zephaniah proclaims, “*Shout for joy!*”, but then John the Baptist warns his listeners to straighten up, because there is one coming who will burn with unquenchable fire.

The very nature of our Advent celebration is a clashing of moods: *rejoice!...but repent.* Yes, it’s a penitential season, but on this Gaudete Sunday, as we light the wreath’s rose-colored candle, we intentionally focus on the cause of joy in it all.

So what is this joy? At weddings, I almost always remind the couple that the love they are pledging to one another is not an emotion or a feeling, as we express it in popular music. Love as we understand it in our faith is an act of the will. And it’s true for joy: it’s not a mere feeling or a momentary pleasure; it too is a choice, an act of the will.

Think of St. Paul the beautiful words from the second reading: “*Rejoice in the Lord always....Have no anxiety at all....the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*”. He wrote these words to the Christians of Philippi from a prison cell. The joy that inspired and lived in his words was not the result of the circumstances of the moment, but instead something deeper within.

You may know that Beethoven developed a hearing impairment so severe that he began to isolate himself due to the embarrassment of his condition. What a curse for a musical genius. And yet it was while facing the harsh effect of that advancing condition that he composed his beautiful and buoyant Ode to Joy. How?

I want to suggest that a deeper and prevailing joy—aside from being an act of the will—comes from remembering both God’s promises that await us, and God’s promises that have been fulfilled. Whether it’s the stresses of this season or those that confront us any time of year—the things that cause us worry, the difficult realities that leave us wondering “*How is this going to work out?*”—in those present causes for concern, we must hold on to the promises fulfilled from the past.

What I mean is that in every crisis of my past, somehow God saw me through. It may not have been the solution I would have had in mind and it may not have been an instant fix, but somehow, He brought things back into order, even if I didn’t see it happening at the time. If He did it then, He’ll do it now.

This call to joy doesn’t ask us to ignore our all-too-real troubles, but instead to also see beyond them. We all know people who live with an abiding joy. It’s not that nothing ever goes wrong in their lives, but rather that they hold on to the promises of God to see them through.

May we not show up at Christmas to greet our newborn King with only our causes for stresses and worry. These days of Advent call us to meditate on God’s promises. Whether it’s concerns about our family, our work, our finances, our health, or our grieving and broken hearts—joy as an act of the will, demands that we make some space to contemplate both His promises fulfilled, but also His promises to come, for each and for all.

¹ Robert P. Waznak, SS, *Lift Up Your Hearts*

CCS COLLECTION

On this Gaudete Sunday, we consider that we foster hope for ourselves in being agents of hope for others. It's true, part of what nurtures hope lies in reaching out to others in need, lifting them up. It draws us out of ourselves and orients us toward hope.

This happens to be the weekend in Advent each year when we are asked to contribute toward *Catholic Community Services*, the agency by which Catholics of Washington serve those of our state who need access to affordable housing; assisting seniors who struggle in low-income, helping to provide outpatient chemical dependency treatment services for those who wouldn't be able to otherwise afford it, and so much more. 90% of what is given to CCS goes directly to the services they provide, so the donations go where we want them to go—to those in need.

ENVELOPES:

- In the pews
- they have a QR code (directs you to CCS's giving platform)

COLLECTION:

- CCS envelopes to be placed in the collection baskets with regular tithing (rather than a second collection).

I ask you to consider giving a few dollars—or more, if so compelled—to be agents of hope for others, echoing the words of St. Paul: *“Brothers and sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always... rejoice!... The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all.” May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*