Gospel: JN 1:6-8, 19-28
A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, “Who are you?” He admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, “I am not the Christ.” So they asked him, “What are you then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?” He said: “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘make straight the way of the Lord,’” as Isaiah the prophet said.” Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.” This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

HOMILY
A state trooper sees a car on the expressway doing 27 miles an hour and pulls the car over to make sure everything is okay. As he approaches, he notices that the driver is an elderly nun, and he asks, “Excuse me, sister. But are you all right?” She replies, “Oh, yes officer. We’re just fine. Was I doing something wrong?” The officer says, “Well sister, you were traveling well under the speed limit and I was concerned that you might be having car trouble or something.” “But officer”, the nun interrupts, “I saw a sign there about a mile back that said 27, and I know I wasn’t going any faster than that.” Laughing to himself, the trooper says, “Sister, that was a state highway route marker, this is Route 27, not the speed limit. The speed limit signs have an MPH at the bottom.” “Oh, now don’t I feel foolish!” replied the nun turning shades of red. “That’s ok, but please try to be more careful, I would hate to see you get hurt.” finished the officer. Then as he turns to say good-bye to the nuns in the back seat, he notices for the first time that they are trembling violently and quite pale. “Sister, what is wrong with your friends? Can I escort you to a hospital?” She replies, “Oh, no, they’re fine. We just turned off of Route 125.”

We like humor – it relaxes us, it makes us forget the woes of our life, the problems of the world, even for just a few moments. We are temporarily happy, we are joyful – now, there’s a word very popular during this pre-Christmas season, this preparatory season of Advent, isn’t it. Being joyful,
REJOICE! But, Deacon Dave, you might say, aside from the tiny bit of humor you just shared, what do we have to be joyful about? Overall, the news all around us, in the nation and the world, can be quite unsettling, to the point of depressing … we’re buried with snow, and the Christmas lights and decorations on the outside of the house never got finished … school exams may be coming up … and the Christmas shopping is nowhere near finished! Where is the joy in that? What is there to be joyful about? … And then I remember Thursday morning, as I’m shoveling out the car so I can get to work and I see the postman delivering a package to my neighbor – I muttered something about all the snow and he gave me a great big smile and said, “You know, it could have been a lot worse.” I had to acknowledge and return his joy-filled answer!

So, REJOICE, everyone, REJOICE! That’s the key word for today, and for today’s readings – the 3rd Sunday in Advent – REJOICE! Gaudete Sunday, as it’s traditionally known, from the Latin of our opening prayer for today! Did you hear it then? And then, we are treated to that theme of rejoicing in each of our three readings – the first two actually said the word again! But each reading had a different setting – like looking at a large diamond in the middle of a room from different angles – but they are all looking at the same diamond, the same Good News of salvation, the same Good News of hope, through our Lord and God. In our first reading, from Isaiah, we have the author prophesying the role of God’s Servant, the Christ who is to come, as bringing glad tidings to the poor, healing the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. The people hearing this great news needed to hear it – they were in exile – the world around them was dark, and they saw hope in the words of the prophet. And then, in our second reading, Paul is telling the Thessalonians to rejoice always and pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances, and other actions that would help them retain the Good News of the Gospel amidst the world around them. They were getting a little restless, it had been about 20 years since Christ’s Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension – they were expecting Him to return at any moment – the ultimate joy for them. Paul was reminding them about their faith, and to be joyful and thankful in it, while awaiting the coming of Our Lord. And then, in our Gospel reading, we have John the Baptist, subjected to a series of questions from Jewish priests, Levites and Pharisees, who were very confused about who he was and what he was really doing. John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets, but also the first of the New Testament witnesses to the Messiah. Based on today’s readings, we might also want to call him John the Witness – witnessing and testifying to the light – the light among the darkness of the world around him – proclaiming hope to his large group of followers – that’s why they were all coming to him for baptism. John witnessed to the coming of the Christ, the Messiah, he was the voice of one crying out in the desert, making straight the way of the Lord, pointing the way to Christ, the source of hope. Hope among the trials, difficulties and darkness they had in their lives … hope. REJOICE!

As an interesting aside, John truly was the first witness to Jesus – if you remember when Mary visited Elizabeth after the Annunciation, the baby John leapt in his mother’s womb – joyfully witnessing to his Lord even before their births!

As Catholic Christians, we are called to be a joy-filled people, to believe in and personally enjoy the Good News, the joy-filled message of hope and eternal salvation. And, just like John the Baptist and
Paul and the prophet in Isaiah, we are each called in some way to witness our faith in our Lord and God, to help others also enjoy that joy-filled message. Now, we aren’t expected to live in the desert and eat wild honey and locusts like the Baptist, but we do live in a desert in many ways, don’t we. The desert of the darkness of the world around us – a desert of poverty, afflictions, addictions and false gods. Remember that darkness only wins if there is no light – the light of a single candle can overcome the darkness. So how can we, as faith-filled and joy-filled Christians, light that one candle and joyfully witness to our faith, especially during this season of Advent, where we prepare for the celebration of the coming of our Lord at Christmas? The most obvious way is, of course, to keep Christ in Christmas – He is the reason for the season. Keep your primary focus on Christ, say a prayer for guidance, and everything will follow. Events during Advent can certainly include a trip to Santa for the young ones, but don’t forget to also include a nativity setting at home, bedtime stories about our Lord or other events with religious overtones. For yourself, stop in at the Abbey of the Genesee for prayer, or a chapel that offers Eucharistic Adoration for some quiet prayer, or even here at St. Louis on Thursday evenings for Holy Hour – silence, as Fr Bob noted a few weeks ago, to hear God, to enjoy our presence with God. Second, it’s ok to slow down during these next few weeks and enjoy (there’s that word again) … enjoy the time and the view from Route 27, rather than the hectic and frantic pace from Route 125. Not everything has to be done – prioritize Christ and enjoy. Third – consider including in your Christmas gift-giving some religious books and other articles that can encourage others to joyfully follow the path made straight by our Lord. And, how about giving some gifts that can’t be bought in a store:

- place something in your home that reflects your Catholic faith that you can see each day and rejoice in the gift of your faith;
- get into the habit of asking God each day to bless those you love, and to thank God for what you have been given;
- be thankful to others, acknowledge them and any acts of kindness they share;
- and this wrapped and packaged box sitting in front of me here? It’s empty now, but let it represent something that you’ll do or you’ll get, for yourself or for others, to make this an especially joyful time with God. Have fun with it! - Begin an annual tradition.

We are encouraged in this Advent season, and especially on this Gaudete Sunday, that there is good news to rejoice about, good news for us and for all around us. We are encouraged to witness to this good news, to proclaim the good news and rejoice about it. We are encouraged to bring tidings of joy, to bring light to the darkness of the world around us … to be that voice of one … to be a good Christian example in what we say and what we do … to pray each day for guidance, courage and a joy-filled spirit … to share our joy-filled faith. We are encouraged to … REJOICE!!

We will now continue our joy-filled Eucharistic celebration.