December 16, 2018
Third Sunday in Advent – “Be JOY-Filled!”
Deacon Dave Snyder

Reading 1 Zephaniah 3:14-18A
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, you have no further misfortune to fear.
On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.

Reading 2 Philippians 4:4-7
Brothers and sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The crowds asked John the Baptist, “What should we do?” He said to them in reply, “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He answered them, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.” Soldiers also asked him, “And what is it that we should do?” He told them, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.”
Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, “I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people.

HOMILY
Little Bobby went to his mother and demanded a new bicycle. She decided that he should take a look at himself and the way he had been acting, telling him, “Well Bobby, it isn't Christmas and we don't have the money to just go out and buy you anything you want, whenever you want. So why don't you write a letter to Jesus and pray for one instead.” His mother sent him to his room, and after his temper tantrum settled down, he finally sat down to write a letter to Jesus.

Dear Jesus, I've been a very good boy this year and would very much appreciate a new bicycle. ... Your Friend, Little Bobby

Little Bobby then remembered what his mother said, and he realized that Jesus really knew what kind of boy he had been. So, he ripped up the letter and decided to give it another try.

Dear Jesus, I've been an OK boy this year and I really want a new bicycle. ... Yours Truly, Little Bobby
Well, Little Bobby knew this wasn’t honest either so he tore the letter up and tried again.

Dear Jesus, I thought about being a good boy this year – can I have a new bicycle? ...
Signed, Little Bobby

Little Bobby thought about it again, looked deep down in his heart, crumpled up the letter, threw it in the trash can and went running outside. He aimlessly wandered around, upset because of the way he treated his parents and really considering all he had done. He finally found himself in front of a Catholic Church. He went inside, knelt down, and looked around, not knowing what he really should do. Finally, he got up and began to walk out the door, while looking at all the statues. He grabbed a small one and ran out the door. He went home, hid the statue under his bed and wrote another letter.

Jesus, I’ve broken many of the Ten Commandments. I shot spit wads in school, lied to my teacher, broke my sister’s Barbie doll in half, and lots more. I’m desperate. I’ve got your mama. If you ever want to see her again, give me a bike. ... Signed, You know who

So, how’s YOUR Advent going? Some might say something like, “Well, we’ve got the tree, but it’s not up yet, we’ve decorated, got most of the presents already, and thank goodness for Amazon, to avoid those lines in the malls.” But, how’s Advent going for you?

Advent is intended to focus on the coming of Christ into the world, both 2000 years ago, and His final coming. Over the years, the Advent focus seems to have been overshadowed by the extensive commercialization of the Christmas Season, including the Hallmark, Lifetime Channel and other definitions of the “real meaning of Christmas,” now starting as early as October. But, like Lent, Advent is intended to be a time to look even deeper into ourselves, to truly reflect on the relationship we have with Jesus, to have an honest assessment of that relationship, like Little Bobby, and how we can improve on it. Many of us might remember when Advent included increased fasting, to help us with that reflection. Advent is also a time for an increased and renewed focus on repentance – not just being sorry for our sins and sinfulness, but telling God that we will try even harder to change our lives to be more Christ-like. Each year, our first two Sundays of Advent focus on Christ’s final coming, and the Scripture readings speak of Christ’s return in judgment. Today, the third Sunday of the Advent season, marks the changeover to celebrate the joyous coming of Our Lord at Bethlehem.

To celebrate that changeover, today’s readings celebrate that JOY. And I’ve asked my friend here, Billy Big Mouth Bass, to help me a little. <<<<< Note: Billy is a 12 inch “singing” fish: Don’t Worry! Be Happy!! >>>> But, think again, it’s not just happiness that we hear about in our readings, it’s much more, it’s JOY!! Listen again to a few of those joy-filled words in our First Reading, from Zephaniah: “Shout for joy! Sing joyfully! Be glad and exult with all your heart! ... you have no further misfortune to fear. The LORD, your God, ... will rejoice over you with gladness, ... he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.” Joy just seems to jump from those words, doesn’t it?

And, in our Second Reading, Paul tells the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! ... Have no anxiety at all, Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Joy, joy, joy, and the peace of God – it’s almost like Billy here could have been helping Paul write those words, right Billy? <<<<< Don’t Worry! Be Happy!! >>>>
And, in our Gospel passage, from Luke, John is preaching to the crowd who are gathering around him to be baptized. A few verses earlier, in verses that you didn’t hear, John told them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance ... even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” You brood of vipers? Cut down and thrown into the fire? What happened to the joy?

And that leads us to the topic of joy vs happiness – now that needs much more than the few minutes we have here, but I’ll try to sum them up. The world around us, now and even 2000 years ago, equates happiness with external things – food we enjoy, the kids getting to bed on time, the Bills winning the Super Bowl (or even having a winning season!), more money, more things, the latest I-phone, the fastest internet for gaming, more friends on Facebook. Happiness is based on external people, circumstances, or occasions all happening with what I think I need so that I become happier – if only I won the lottery, had a time-share in Europe. The focus is on me, me, and me. Quite often, we identify our happiness with people or things we don’t have and probably can’t have. And, be careful – watch out for the false happiness that can lead us or others into sin or sinful situations.

And then there is JOY, which is internal and not affected by external circumstances. The Bible doesn’t promise happiness, but it does promise JOY. Let me repeat that: **The Bible doesn’t promise happiness, but it does promise JOY.** Our heart has a huge hole in it that only God can fill. Christian JOY, mentioned 56 times in the New Testament, is focused on an internal relationship with Christ, a deep-down acceptance of Christ in our life, an acceptance of Christ’s teachings. Our Christian faith encourages us to share, to be honest with others, to not take advantage of others, to be faithful to God – that was the simple message that John was giving the crowd of people, the tax-collectors and the soldiers. And they gobbled it up, because they saw John as a prophet from God, they felt his message as one coming from God, and their acceptance of that message brought them closer to God, bringing them JOY. Let’s look again at that last line from today’s Gospel passage, “Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people.” That good news brought them much more than happiness, it brought them JOY!

Don’t we feel that same JOY when we write out those year-end checks to our favorite charities, or to the Catholic Ministries Appeal (right, Father?), or bring in Angel Tree Christmas items for the refugees at Saint’s Place? Don’t we feel that same JOY when we can help someone out when they truly need it? Jesus wants us to also feel that JOY when we know Him better, when we better know our faith, when we help others better know the faith. Jesus wants us to feel that JOY, that inner peace, that will sustain us throughout life, whether we are feeling happy or not, when we go through periods of sickness, of pain, of failure, even of grief. Inner JOY and peace from God can help us get through those periods, can help us to understand them as part of our lives.

Be JOY-filled, the Lord is coming! I encourage you to take advantage of these few remaining days of Advent to look deep inside, to reflect and improve on your relationship with Jesus, to more fully understand and appreciate the love that He offers, and the peace and the JOY that comes from that love. Maybe consider putting the word JOY on a Christmas ornament to hang on the tree this year, in a location that everyone can see, as a reminder that the peace and JOY that God provides us throughout life is more, much more, than the often temporary feelings we get when we are happy. Perhaps our friend, Billy Bass, should really sing, **“Don’t worry, be JOY-Filled!!”**