

Third Sunday of Advent B
Is 61:1-2, 10-11; 1 Th 5:16-24; Jn 1:6-8, 19-28
December 17, 2023

This Third Sunday of Advent in the Church's liturgy is called "Gaudete Sunday" or the 'Sunday to rejoice' because it marks the halfway point of Advent. We wear rose-color vestments and we light the rose-color candle on the Advent wreath. This Sunday celebration goes back to a time when Advent was a period of deep penance and fasting. The halfway point was a time to rejoice, to get excited for the coming of God to us in human form.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, how do we feel? Is the nearness of Christmas a cause for great joy in our life, or did we even take time to think about it? Are we anxious about having time to get everything done in before Christmas? Are we anxious about getting the Christmas cards written and mailed, or about getting all the presents bought and wrapped?

Traditionally, Advent was a quiet, somber, deeply prayerful time of the Church year. It was a time for spiritual preparation for Christmas. There was Advent preparation followed by Christmas celebration. In today's culture, Advent is spent sending cards, buying presents, attending pre-holiday parties, and then, the day after Christmas, suddenly, it is all over. The Christmas carols disappear and everything is geared toward the New Year.

We have already made our preparations for this year, but maybe we should give some thought to Advent and Christmas next year, so we allow Advent be Advent and then allow the Christmas season to really be a season.

Do all the Christmas cards have to arrive by December 25th? Why can't they arrive during Christmas week, those eight days we as Church consider as one Christmas day, or, why can't they arrive throughout the Christmas Season to continue the joy each day?

Do we have to receive all our gifts on December 25th? Why not throughout the Christmas season? Do all the Christmas gatherings and celebrations have to happen by December 25th? Why not continue them until the Epiphany, when the Messiah is made known to all peoples?

Does our celebration of Christmas leave us better off spiritually? Is our faith deeper? Are the bonds of friendship and community with the Church stronger? Do we come out of the Christmas season renewed, or are we relieved that it is all over?

The Advent season does not have to be an exhausting round of frantic activity, a build-up to something that is gone in one day. Advent can be a time of revitalization and renewal, if we allow the first two weeks of preparation and waiting, and the last two weeks of anticipation for birth of the Christ Child, to truly **BE** a time of spiritual preparation and waiting.

On this Gaudete Sunday, this Sunday to Rejoice, we can find joy in this hectic (frenzied) Advent season.

For us, Christmas can be a time when we realize that the most important things in our life are the spiritual ones – the assurance of God’s love and his ready forgiveness that comes to us in Jesus. We all know people who are not sure of God love and forgiveness for them, and how terribly troubled (haunted) they are. For us, each Mass is the assurance of God’s love and of his forgiveness.

There are the friendships, loyal associates, possibly a faithful spouse, and caring people who are the real assets in each of our lives.

The real power and joy of Christmas centers in the truth not only that redemption has occurred, but that it has continuing power in our life as Jesus calls us to begin again, to awaken to his grace, to open our eyes and ears to his presence. What has been in our life in the past and present does not have to be in the future. A new life, a new way of living is available to us in Jesus the Christ.

The power of the cross and the Resurrection is never exhausted; it never runs out of steam. The promise and power of the Resurrection is as alive and powerful today as it was on that first Easter morning. And that power and promise is always summoning us to new life. As the prophet Isaiah says in today’s first reading, “*the Lord comes to set us free,*” to bring liberty and release from everything that binds us emotionally, spiritually, personally.

We can also rejoice today in all those who are preparing to enter the Church at Easter. These people show us that we are not part of a historical preservation society, but a community of faith that is growing each moment, each day, each week.

There are many reasons to rejoice this Sunday, but they can get lost in the frantic preparations for Christmas. John the Baptist in today’s Gospel says that the Messiah is one among us who is not recognized. It can be a real tragedy, with all the lights around us, that we miss the true Light. Advent is a time of year when we can learn once more to see, to appreciate, to recognize, the ways that God is present among us.

If we use this Advent season to learn once more to see the work and presence of God among us, then the Christmas season will be a time to celebrate his great presence and power at work in our lives.

Take the time to let Advent be Advent, and then Christmas will truly be Christmas – not only a day, but a season of rebirth in Jesus.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.