

“The Joy of Our Salvation” by David Lloyd

Advent 3

December 12, 2021



We're in the midst of a pandemic virus with seemingly no end to its mutations. At the same time, we are experiencing epidemics of addiction and deaths from opioids and from firearm violence. Our political partisanship has risen to levels dangerous to our representative democracy. Our nation continues to experience racial injustice and violence against racial, ethnic, and religious minorities but may not have the will to examine our history to see what brought us to this state and what we can do about it. And threatening us over everything else is the dangerous impact of climate change. We want, we need, we pray to be delivered from all this, to be saved from all this.

Are you feeling joyous this Advent? Advent was originally a 40-day fast beginning on November 12, much like the 40-day fast of Lent. It was a time of penitence in preparation for Christmas. Fortunately, in the ninth century Advent was reduced to four weeks. That reduction of penitential time alone should make us joyous! Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is Gaudete Sunday in Roman Catholicism, the Anglican church, and the Protestant churches. Many churches light a rose-colored candle in their Advent wreath on Gaudete Sunday. In Latin, *Gaudete* means "rejoice," which is the first word of the introit in the Mass for today, coming from the Philippians text we heard.

The readings for Gaudete Sunday are always about Christian joy, rejoicing in the Lord. Henri Nouwen described our Christian joy as independent of our happiness. We need external conditions, such as health, mental health, and economic sufficiency to be happy, but Christian joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away."[\[1\]](#)

Among my earliest memories are the worship services in Trinity Lutheran Church, which commands a rural hillside about ten miles south of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It's just north of the village of Pleasant Valley, where my father came to teach vocational agriculture in the early 1940s. (His landlady conspired with my grandmother to introduce him to my mother there!) Founded 270 years ago this year, it was a very German Lutheran congregation. Almost all my grandparents' generation spoke Pennsylvania Dutch as their first language, and worship finally switched from being in German to English when the U.S. entered World War I, in order to "become more American" and avoid suspicion.

Each week's sermon was followed by the congregation singing fervently, if not always beautifully, the offertory from the King James Version of Psalm 51, verses ten through twelve:

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

As I have been meditating on the theme Celebration Circle chose for this year's Advent – Restore Us, O God – the memory of this offertory arose, and it's become an earworm that I can't shake.

Today's readings from Isaiah and Zephaniah in the Hebrew scriptures are full of joy, and I hope you have felt their joy this week. Solomon's kingdom had been split in two and the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed, with its people scattered throughout the Assyrian empire in 721 BCE. Hezekiah ruled the southern kingdom of Judah from about 715 to 687 BCE. Prior to his rule, the Assyrian army had invaded Judah, forced it to pay a huge annual sum of tribute that seriously harmed the kingdom's economy, and had put one of their pagan altars inside the Temple. Hezekiah removed the Assyrian altar and many of the other Canaanite shrines throughout Judah. But the Assyrian threat grew, and Hezekiah joined Syria in a rebellion. When the Assyrians attacked, either "an Angel of the Lord" descended on their army (a plague?) or word of rebellion back in Assyria came, but in either case the remnants of the Assyrian army withdrew. This event may have encouraged Isaiah to write the psalm of praise included in this week's lectionary:

On that Day (of the Lord), Israel will say:...

You are my deliverer.

With joy you will draw water

from the wells of salvation.

With joy we will draw water from the wells of salvation.

That's what we want restored: our joy as we draw water from the wells of God's salvation. Gaudete!

Four generations and about 60 years later (from about 628 to 622 BCE), Zephaniah, the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah, foresaw that Assyria's power would diminish as Babylon's increased. Zephaniah railed about Jerusalem's complacency spiritually and politically and warned that the Day of the Lord was coming soon. It wasn't going to be a celebration; it was going to be a terrible day of anguish, devastation, and darkness, God's judgment upon the Jewish people for their faithlessness and social injustice. Zephaniah pleaded for the leaders and the people to change their ways, and then a remnant would be saved. But Zephaniah had faith in God's love. As we heard, what was taken away would be brought back, the exiles would be returned, the people of God who remained faithful would be restored. They would experience the joy of salvation. Gaudete!

The Revised Common Lectionary for Year C always includes part of Luke's account of John the Baptist's ministry on Gaudete Sunday. I prefer it to be part of the Epiphany season rather than Advent, but here it is. In last week's gospel Luke says that John "proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?" I confess that I didn't pay attention to that phrase, but after studying it, I see that I was wrong, the baptism John proclaimed fits with Advent, and especially with Gaudete Sunday. It fits very well, indeed.

John "proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness

of sins." If the text had said, "John baptized people, forgiving them of their sins after they had repented," it would mean that the people repented first, that is, they confessed their sinful ways and changed to a new lifestyle, followed by God's forgiveness that occurred in the act of John's baptism. That would be peoples' action first, God's action of forgiveness second, that the people earned their salvation. But the gospels in both Luke and Mark say that John "proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That is, God's action of forgiveness occurred first, the people's repentance second. John's baptism was a sign of their repentance – their new lives – after their forgiveness by God. John's proclamation foretells God's act of grace, forgiving us before we had repented, "while we were yet sinners" in the famous words of Saint Paul. People don't earn their salvation.

John's "proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" fits with the first line of the offertory, verse ten of Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." It is God's action that creates my clean heart, it is God's action that renews a right spirit within me. I can't do these. It is God's grace, God's forgiveness, which changes me, not my own actions. The proper response to that is Christian joy. Gaudete!

Some people came to John seeking baptism so that God would forgive them. Acts of repentance may have been far from their minds. John lost his temper. He called them a brood of vipers, which sounds bad enough to us but meant even worse to his fellow Jews because newborn vipers were believed to eat through their mother's stomach, killing her. This is not something we sing about during Advent! Like a prophet of old, John warned them to produce "good fruit" as the example of their repentance.

John scolded them with reference to a Jewish tradition and with a Hebrew pun, which we gentile Christians didn't learn.

He said, "Don't presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,'" from the Jewish tradition of *zukunft avot*, meaning that children benefit from the spiritual merits of their forefathers, "'for I tell you that God can raise sons (*banim*) from Abraham from these very stones (*avanim*).'" John warned them that a tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and tossed into the fire. John's words recall for me the second line from the offertory, verse eleven of Psalm 51: "Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me." God's forgiveness must be followed by our genuine repentance, visible good fruit, or God can choose to cast us out.

Not surprisingly, the people asked, "What shall we do then?" which is another way of asking, "What would good fruit look like?" John responded as an authentic prophet; he directed them to end the same social injustice that prophets eight centuries before had demanded: "Let the one with two coats share with the one who has none. Let those who have food do the same." To those who collected the detested tax for the Roman emperor and added a percentage for themselves, which made Jews view them as corrupt traitors, John said, "Exact nothing over and above your fixed amount." To King Herod's soldiers, John said, "Don't bully anyone. Don't accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay."

This should have sounded familiar. The people heard similar words in the scriptures read in their synagogues, words that had been spoken by Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah centuries before. Those prophets had spoken during the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Each of them had reminded the people of God's love for them, but foretold doom for their nation if the people did not repent and bear good fruit. That doom did come for both kingdoms. But each of their prophecies had also spoken of God's ongoing love for the people, and promised a restoration to God's good graces, and a restoration of their respective glory as a nation, their collective

salvation. However, the full restoration of Judah hadn't happened. The empire of Rome ruled them. The people hearing John were thinking, "Could he be the one? Could John be our deliverer, the one who brings salvation, the Messiah?" They wanted their salvation, their glory days to be restored. But John made it clear he wasn't a messiah. In fact, he described the coming of the Lord in a way that echoed the prophets, saying, "This One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire."

Today's gospel ends with, "Using exhortations like this, John proclaimed the Good News to the people." The examples of social justice he told them to begin were good news, but what was good news about a baptism of fire? It didn't sound like salvation. And it's not exactly good news for us, either. We want our Christian joy to be for the healing, comforting Jesus, who fed multitudes and calmed the angry sea, who told interesting stories that makes us think. Our Christian joy is for "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," not the angry Jesus who took a whip to the money changers and turned over their tables, who prophesied that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed. Where is our joy in that? That's not the Messiah we're preparing for!

I have reflected on Celebration Circle's question, "What do you want God to restore?" and on various people's responses the past three Sundays during our Circle Time. The responses have been rich, with things we want restored, or renewed, or created. The third verse from that Lutheran offertory chant came to me: "restore unto me the joy of thy salvation..." When the question has been asked in our Circle Time, has anyone said, "I want God to restore my joy of God's salvation?" or, "I want God to restore our joy of God's salvation?" Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Perhaps the question should be, Have you felt the joy of God's salvation, or, "How have you felt the joy of God's salvation this week?"

Turning to our epistle, Paul had been arrested for being a

missionary of Christianity. He was detained, and although it's unclear whether he was merely under house arrest or whether he was in jail, he wrote to this congregation in the city of Philippi in northern Greece. He had visited this house church with fellow missionaries Silas, Timothy, and perhaps Luke. Now his missionary work had ended, and yet he wrote a message of Christian joy:

Rejoice in the Savior always! I say it again: Rejoice! Let everyone see your forbearing spirit. Our Savior is near. Dismiss all anxiety from your minds; instead, present your needs to God through prayer and petition, giving thanks for all circumstances. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

If there was ever a message that we need to hear during our troubled 2021, it is this one. Let us rejoice in Christ Jesus, dismissing all anxiety from our minds, continuing to pray, giving thanks for all circumstances! Gaudete!

How can we have Christian joy during Advent 2021? We can be joyous because God has forgiven us, that our salvation has come. It is because of that that we can change our lives, living out our repentance by bearing good fruit, working to end social injustice. Because of our salvation we can pray, giving thanks for all circumstances, and asking God to

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Gaudete, Amen.

[\[i\]](#) Laskey, Mike Jordan (11 December 2014).

“This Gaudete Sunday, Rejoice Despite the Heartbreak All Around Us”.

National Catholic Reporter. Kansas City, Missouri. Retrieved 11 December 2018.