

## Gaudete

Zephaniah 3:14-18; Luke 2:10-11

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When I was a child, my church didn't celebrate Advent. We were Baptists and at the time, Advent was considered something that only high liturgical churches did and there was the feeling that if we celebrated Advent, the next thing you knew, we'd be burning incense and chanting psalms in Latin. By the time I was a teenager, however, my church had decided that recognizing Advent might be a way of saving Christmas from the materialism of the marketplace, so we gave in, got an Advent wreath, and dutifully lit the candles every week, but our inexperience with the liturgy showed. Since Baptist churches have no altars, no one was quite sure where to put the wreath and so most years it looked quite lonely and out of place in the front of the church on its little stand. One year, in fact, the minister forgot it was there and knocked it on his way to the pulpit causing the candles to topple over and set the whole wreath on fire. It was quite a memorable Sunday. Most notably, though, the candles that we used in our Baptist Advent wreath were simple white candles. We didn't have special altar candles — remember, no altar — so before Advent, someone would go to the local department store and buy white dinner candles, the plainest ones they could find. No one would have ever thought of getting *purple* candles; if an advent wreath felt suspiciously high church; an advent wreath with purple candles felt downright Catholic.

All of that is to say that when I first came to this church, I had to ask our Episcopalian and Lutheran members, "What do I do with this pink candle that came in the box?"

The pink candle, I have since learned, is for the third week of Advent, traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday, or the Sunday of Joy. In spite of the frenzy of our secular Christmas preparations, Advent is supposed to be a time of repentance and confession in which the people of the church are to prepare ourselves spiritually for the coming of Christ's birth. Concerned, however, that a full month of fasting and thinking about our sins might be spiritually debilitating instead of uplifting, the Church fathers made the third Sunday of Advent a respite from contemplation and on Gaudete Sunday, we are encouraged to reflect instead on joy. While the purple candles represent the penitent heart, the pink candle represents a heart lightened by the joy of the coming good news.

And so today, on the third Sunday of Advent, the church commands you to be joyful. In your list of all of your Christmas preparations, did you have today marked down as the day to be joyful? Dec 4th — buy a Christmas tree. December 8th — mail out Christmas cards. December 12th — be joyful. If you didn't have it marked down, then you had better get your smile ready because today is the day the church has reserved for joy, so 1, 2, 3, Go! Be joyful!

It feels silly to command us to be joyful on schedule and yet how much of our Christmas preparation is an attempt to make sure that on December 25th all of our loved ones will experience a day of great joy? We deck the halls with boughs of holly, fill the house with the scent of roast goose and pumpkin pie, buy just the right presents for each person, in the hopes that on December 25th when the sun comes up, our homes will be filled with joy right on schedule. And sometimes we do manage to achieve a heightened happiness for our family and friends, but just as often, the festivities are imperfect, marred by Aunt Myrtle's criticisms of the way the table looks, or Uncle Carl's drunken discourse on politics. A child sulks

because she didn't get the computer game she wanted, or the dog eats the Christmas candy and throws up all over the living room. Not that that's ever happened to me.

And those are just the small obstacles to our Christmas cheer. What about families who have lost a loved one and are acutely aware of their absence around the tree? Or how can we glibly promise joy to the parents who have no money to buy their kids gifts, or to those going through a divorce, or to people spending the day alone because friends and family are far away? What does the promise of joy on Christmas mean to them?

On an internet discussion board, someone asked, "What was your most disappointing Christmas?" and people shared stories of hard times and painful memories. One young man said, "When I was about eight, my mom re-married and though my stepfather was a wonderful guy, his mother — my step-grandmother — was very unhappy about his new marriage. That Christmas we went to my stepfather's house for his family gathering and my step-grandmother began to pass out the gifts for all of the kids. My step cousins got dolls, Easy Bake ovens, and typical sorts of presents, but when my new grandmother came to me and my brothers, she handed each of us a tiny tiny package. We opened them to discover that she had bought one of those sets of cheap die cast metal cars that come three for a dollar and then had given each of us *one* of the cars. She spent a grand total of 33 cents on each of us, clearly intending it as a statement of how little she thought of her new grandchildren." (1)

In spite of the Hallmark movies, Christmas isn't a happy time for everyone.... nor is there anything in our Bible that promises it will be. As I mentioned in Dexter Time, the shepherds went home empty handed from their visit to the stable. No one gave them presents or punch or even a funky holiday sweater to keep them warm as they watched their sheep. What the shepherds received on Christmas night didn't make their lives any more comfortable or easy or free from stress or any of the things that we associate with happiness, but happiness is not what they were promised. Listen carefully to what the angel says: "I bring you good news of a great joy," not of a great happiness but of a great joy. Happiness is about the "what" of life, but joy is about the "who."

According to psychologist Roy Baumeister,, research shows that parents are less happy interacting with their children than they are exercising, eating, and watching television. "Partly what we do as human beings, [however,]" Baumeister said, "is to take care of others and contribute to others. This makes life meaningful, but it does not necessarily make us happy." (2)

The angels promised us joy, not happiness, and joy is about meaning, about knowing that what you are doing is valuable, and about who it is you are living for. The joy promised at Christmas is a promise for all people, no matter what the circumstances of their lives, because the good news is not about the "what" of our lives; it is about the "who."

"I am sending my son to dwell among you," God said, "and to show you the way to salvation. In him, you will discover the depth of my love for you. You will know forgiveness and the healing of your hearts. He will teach you grace and you will learn from him how much your life can mean when it is given to others in love."

Happiness is about the "what" of life, but joy is about the "who;" who will be with us, who will love us, who will make our lives deep and meaningful, who will never leave us, and who we will become when we welcome the Savior into our lives."

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

That young man who received the paltry gift from his step-grandmother didn't end his story on Christmas day. He continued his story and said that a few days after Christmas, his step-grandmother called to invite the family to her house for New Year's Eve. When his stepfather answered the phone, the boy heard him decline the invitation, which clearly made his step-grandmother angry. The boy could hear her raised voice on the other end of the phone, and then he heard his stepfather say, “Mom, what you did to the kids was mean. They were well-behaved and courteous at your house and yet you deliberately put them down. They think you hate them and don't know why. You need to either accept my kids or you won't be seeing me anymore.”

The young man wrote, “[When he hung up the phone,] my heart swelled. That new guy in our family stuck up for us. That's the day my stepdad became my [father.]”  
Happiness is about what you have but joy is about who you are for, and who is for you. The joy we receive at Christmas is the promise that Christ will come to us regardless of our circumstances or the state of our hearts. He will enter our lives even when happiness is elusive and life is hard to bear. He will come to be present with us and remind us that we are not alone even if all of the world should reject us. And he will show us how to do the same for others so that our small, short lives may have a meaning and purpose that outlasts all else.

And when we embrace that promise, we will know joy because we will realize that our hearts and the hearts of those we love are not in our hands but rest always in the hands of Emmanuel, God with us.

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Footnotes:

1. From a Quora discussion. This is a paraphrase.
2. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/>