

Advent 3, Year A

- Our Epistle this morning ends with an ominous piece of advice from James:
- “As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”
- Nothing like an example of suffering and patience to get us into the holiday spirit, right?
- Though I have to say, you could make a case for suffering and patience as themes of Advent
- Suffering and patience are certainly on display in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, for example, when that prophet is foretelling the restoration of the fortunes of Israel that will come at the end of the Babylonian exile – Isaiah can imagine a future of wholeness for the people of Israel, a time when even the land itself will rejoice at what God has done, if only they are patient in their suffering
- And in place of the Psalm this morning we hear the Magnificat, the song of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose yes to God was so important for the Incarnation that she comes in the tradition to be called Theotokos, the God-bearer
- But Mary knows her share of suffering, too, and of patience
- The suffering and patience of childbirth, and later of watching her son die for the sake of the world – and the suffering and patience that comes with living in a society that didn’t see her as all that important, despite the son she bore – as evidenced by the fact that we have to hear this song from Luke’s Gospel, because in Matthew the Annunciation is not to Mary at all, but to Joseph
- And of course, the patience and suffering of John the Baptist, who at this point in our Gospel story is in prison, still waiting to see if Jesus is in fact the anticipated Messiah, or if he must wait longer
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- I have mixed feelings about today
- Day we call Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin imperative for “Rejoice!”
- Introit (historic Psalm or passage of Scripture sung at beginning of service) for today taken from Phil 4 – “Rejoice in the world always, and again I say rejoice”
- So Gaudete Sunday, or Rose Sunday, is meant to be a time of rejoicing amid the serious and sobriety of Advent
- The rose-colored vestments were meant to be a lightening of the penitential purple vestments historically worn during the rest of the Advent season

- But of course Advent tends not to be viewed as much of a penitential season anymore
- It's unlikely to hear of people giving things up for Advent, for example, in acts of fasting or self-denial
- We don't generally spend a great deal of time during Advent thinking about the weight of our sins, or of trying to make peace with each other and with God
- And we more often wear blue vestments, rather than purple, to distinguish this season from the penitence of Lent
- But as I said, I have mixed feelings about all this – not merely because I think penitence is an underrated and extremely important part of our life in the faith, and one that we neglect too much, leading to feelings of alienation from God
- But mainly I have mixed feelings about today because I worry that when the church says rejoice we might simply hear “be happy”
- We might view this Sunday as yet one more burden when we already feel so many, most of them from the secular holiday season
- You know the ones I mean: find and buy the perfect gifts for everyone on your lists – make time to be with family regardless of family status – get along with everyone you meet – makes sure that everything gets done and that everything works out absolutely perfectly
- We're told to do all of these things if we want to be happy
- And yet we almost always fail to do all these things, even if we can manage most of them, and so we wind up unhappy
- And then we come to church, this Third Sunday of Advent, and we are told to rejoice
- If we think we're just being told to be happy, then Church has nothing different to offer from what the rest of the world offers us this time each year – if we're just being told to be happy, it's another impossible goal
- Because we can't make ourselves be happy
- Happiness, after all, is dependent upon circumstances
- Happiness is a reaction to the things that are going on around us, nothing more than a result of good things happening
- In other words, happiness, if you think about it, is almost nothing more than the opposite of suffering
- We suffer when bad things happen; we are happy when good things happen to us
- And so in this season when we so often come to realize that we can't make ourselves happy, we don't need to be told to be happy

- This season when we find out that we either can't attain the things the world tells us we need, or that they don't actually fulfill us even if we can, we need something other than happiness
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- Thanks be to God that we aren't told today to be happy – we're told to rejoice
- Henri Nouwen famously observed that “joy is not the same as happiness, We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God's love for us... Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day. It is a choice based on the knowledge that we belong to God and have found in God our refuge and our safety and that nothing, not even death, can take God away from us.”
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- Advent is a season of suffering and patience, but it is also a season of joy
- Not a season of happiness, a season of just hoping good things keep happening to us
- But a season of contemplating God's presence with us – God's presence with us walking this earth – God's presence among us in bread and wine and each other gathered around God's altar – and the promise of God's presence with us at a time when no one knows the day or the hour but at which time everything will be made right again and every tear will be wiped from our eyes – when all our suffering will be obliterated and our patience will be rewarded – a time when our joy will be made complete
- Joy is what this season promises – the joy of belonging to God, and knowing God's love for us crosses every distance, from heaven to earth, from the beginning of creation the end of it, from a manger in Bethlehem to an altar in Jefferson City