

Sermon - 12-13-20
Ps 126; Is 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thes 5:16-24;
Jn 1:6-8, 19-28 3rd Sun in Advent

“Laughter can help improve mood, increase immune system functioning, and moderate stress hormones. Plus, laughter is free, and it lacks harmful or unwanted side effects (with the exception of the occasional side-ache). If a pharmaceutical company were to create a new medication that had the same benefits and side-effects as laughter, with a similar cost, it would be fully endorsed by the medical community.” (National Register of Health Service Psychologists website – 11/17/20)

When the Israelites were released from their captivity in Babylon, they sang the psalm we read today: They sing and shout and laugh with the joy of being home – being free. It is God who has done this for them – for us. We have every reason to rejoice and celebrate the coming of our Savior. The Prophet Isaiah has given us this song of praise to God: “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.” (Is 61:10)

We light the candle that represents joy on this third Sunday of Advent. Our King is coming to us! He does for us, what we cannot do for ourselves – just as the Israelites were conquered by the Babylonian army, so we are conquered by sin. We cannot get ourselves out of our exile. We need Jesus Christ to lift the burden off of us. When we are released, great joy rises up in our hearts. Paul encourages Jesus-followers to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Thes 5:16-18)

When the Apostle Peter wrote to the churches, the persecution of the Roman government was becoming unbearable for Christians. Peter encouraged the people to keep their minds and hearts on Jesus. He said, “Jesus whom having not seen, you love; in whom, though you see him not, yet believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.” (1 Pe 1:8)

The themes of all the Advent candles are fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwelling inside you brings forth these wonderful things: Hope, Peace, Joy – and next week the Love candle.

The story of Norman Cousins is an amazing tribute to the power of laughter. In his book *Anatomy of an illness as perceived by the patient: reflections on healing and regeneration*, (New York: Norton, 1979.) Cousins wrote: “I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep,” he reported. “When the pain-killing effect of the laughter wore off, we would switch on the motion picture projector again and (often), it would lead to another pain-free interval.” Norman Cousins overcame a painful connective tissue disease to live a joyous and fruitful life.

You and I have a resource deeper and richer than the comedies, cartoons and jokes that Norman Cousins used. We have the abiding truth that our God loves us so extravagantly and desires so deeply to bring us to Himself, that He sent His one and only Son to bear all the penalty of our sin and separation from Him. That isn't a joke – yet it makes us smile with gratitude. The great gift of Jesus Christ is the source of our hope, our peace, our joy and the greatest love in the universe.

John Baptist, the prophet of the coming Messiah, was fierce and serious-minded. He was zealous for the things of God. The Apostle John's account – our Gospel reading for today – shows the Baptist's understanding of the place of water baptism in the journey of faith in Jesus. We enact the death of the old man or woman when we plunge into the water. We celebrate the true resurrection that is our heritage through Christ's resurrection the third day as we rise up from the water. John Baptist describes the heavenly and spiritual act of God within us – the Lord's guarantee that we are His forever is not by water, but by fire – the burning presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Some laugh out loud when they receive Holy Baptism. That's the Joy of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A guy named Aaron was installing carpet in a woman's home.

(Continued on next page.)

As he was finishing the master bedroom upstairs, he got a craving for a cigarette.

Aaron looked around and discovered that his cigarettes were missing.

Then he noticed a bump in the middle of his freshly laid carpet and figured that he had put down carpet over the pack of cigarettes without noticing it.

Aaron decided rather than to take up the carpet, he would take his hammer and pound the cigarettes into the ground so no one would know.

When he finished that, the owner of the house walked into the room and commented on what a nice job he had done.

“Aaron, the carpet looks wonderful!” she exclaimed. “Here are your cigarettes; I found them in the kitchen. Oh yes, by the way, have you seen my cellphone?” (jokebuddha.com)

Here's a key to real joy: First, you and I must face that we have done wrong. We have sinned. We open our hearts – our souls – to the Light of Christ. That's hard. We'd rather sweep it under the carpet.

Jesus does not shame you and me. Jesus understands our lostness. He came ***so close*** to us when He was born into humankind. He knows what we are made of. The moment you and I confess what we have done – when we ask God to forgive and cleanse us – He is ready and waiting to apply that precious blood that atones for everything. When He does this for us – we are released. He lifts us up and gives joy – hope – peace deep down inside. We also then must go to those we have hurt and betrayed by our sin. The nearness of Jesus gives you and me courage to tell the truth. And the truth makes us free. Christ gives joy unspeakable and full of glory! Amen.