

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

December 17, 2023 – ADVENT 3, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Jesus is our JOY*”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (God’s Spirit is upon His anointed—the Messiah to come)
Psalm 126 (“The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad.”)
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (We are to rejoice at all times and pray without ceasing)
St. John 1:6-8, 19-28 (John baptized with water; Jesus gives the Holy Spirit)

Advent is a season of hopeful expectation divided into two parts. In the first, we focus on preparing for when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. When *will* Christ return? Jesus deliberately left the answer to this question open so that in every age His people would wait for Him with eager expectation and not fall into a life of sin.

Today we begin the second half of Advent that focuses on our preparation for celebrating Christ’s birth at Bethlehem—an occasion of great rejoicing. However, during this season in which we are called to quiet self-examination and sincere repentance, the Church permits us to rejoice a little early on this third Sunday of Advent, known traditionally as “Gaudete” Sunday. The word is Latin for “rejoice,” and that is why we lit the rose-colored candle this morning. Pink is a cheerful color that reminds us of pleasant things such as roses and cherry blossoms, ripe apples, or the cold-reddened cheeks of children playing in the snow.

Although we are permitted to ease up on our penitential meditations and be joyful in the Lord on this day, St. Paul commands us in our lesson from 1 Thessalonians to rejoice *always*. But how is it possible to rejoice, in those times when we simply don’t feel like it? When we center our attention on our external circumstances or our passing emotions, it *is* impossible to rejoice *always*. However, the rejoicing that St. Paul commands is born of a deep faith in Jesus Christ and the sure hope of eternal life with Him. This type of rejoicing does not depend on the state of our health, the weather, the economy, or our experience of any kind of grief or loss. It also does not depend on whether we’ve finished our Christmas shopping, gotten our baking done, our decorating completed, or our cards sent out.

As I was writing this sermon, I thought of a friend, colleague, professor, and mentor of mine, the Rev. Dr. Martha Giltinan. She went to be with the Lord on December 12, 2014 after battling the ravages of cancer for most of a year. She—and everyone who knew and was praying for her—wanted her to live. But Martha was also prepared to die and go home to meet the Lord when He called, not at a time of her own choosing. “Death has no dominion over me,” was her constant refrain throughout her treatment.

Even after she had lost all her hair, Mtr. Martha posted pictures on Facebook of the crazy hats and colorful wigs she wore, while smiling with her entire face. Although she suffered unspeakable pain, and had spent most of that year in and out of hospitals, her friends posted pictures of her mugging and laughing with them. The joy of the Lord *shone forth* from her, and because of that, this seriously ill woman was able cheer up everyone who visited her in the ER and ICU.

There was another saintly cleric during World War II named Father Alfred Delp. In 1944, he was a 38-year-old priest preparing to take vows as a Jesuit. An outspoken opponent of the Nazis, he helped Jews escape from Germany. On July 28, eight days after a German Army officer, Lt. Col. Claus von Stauffenberg, attempted to assassinate Adolph Hitler as part of a coup d’etat, Fr. Delp was arrested by the Gestapo along with nearly 7,000 others and falsely accused of being a part of the plot. He was convicted and sentenced to death.¹

Awaiting execution, Fr. Delp was imprisoned during Advent and secretly wrote down his reflections and said Mass with the help of a few sympathetic guards. He wrote that Advent was a time for *rousing*—not passive—contemplation.

Because *his* world had been shaken—much as Mtr. Martha’s was by the diagnosis of leukemia—it helped him to see things more clearly. As a result, Fr. Delp entered Advent more intensely and alert than ever. In his reflections, he wrote of a gift he had been given once, of an Advent Angel. The Angel carried a banner that read “Be of good cheer. The Lord is near.” On this Gaudete Sunday, we are to rejoice that the Lord is near, for Christmas is coming closer and our own redemption is drawing nearer. As Fr. Delp suffered in a prison cell, awaiting death, he came to fully appreciate the true meaning of Advent, writing: “May the time never come when men forget about the good tidings and promises, when so immured within the four walls of their prison, they see nothing but gray days through barred windows placed too high to see out of.”

In a footnote to the angel story, both the giver and the gift were destroyed by a World War II bomb. Even so, Fr. Delp reminds us to be attentive to the message of the Angel’s cheering words, and rejoice in the Lord *always*, not only when things are going well.

The virtue of Christian hope is more than mere optimism or positive thinking—after all, not many of us can make ourselves feel better just through *thinking!* Christian hope and joy are rooted in the promises of Christ that never fail. Our Lord did not promise us ultimate happiness in this life; however, He *guarantees it* in the next.

In the meantime, wrote Fr. Delp, we have work to do: “There is so much despair that cries out for comfort; faint courage that needs to be reinforced; perplexity that yearns for meaning... . God’s messengers who have themselves reaped the fruits of Divine seeds, even in the darkest hours, know how to wait for the fullness of the harvest.”

For valiantly taking a stand against the Nazi regime, he was executed by hanging on February 2, 1945. Before he died, Fr. Delp secretly professed his vows as a Jesuit, and died on the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord. Candles are blessed on this Feast Day to recall the prophecy of Simeon that Christ would be the Light of the World.²

In today’s Gospel, St. John the Baptist reveals that he was called to witness to that Light who is Jesus Christ. We who have been baptized into Christ are also called to be lights that shine in the darkness, and to rejoice no matter what our external or internal circumstances are.

Like Mtr. Martha and Fr. Delp, we can have a profound effect on the wellbeing and faith of others when we demonstrate our capacity to be at peace and to be joyful, no matter what is happening—or not happening. In fact, the darker this world becomes—and it certainly looks very dark these days—the more the world is in need of the Light of Christ shining *through us*.

We should not be afraid to stand up for, and speak out on, right moral values and ethical practices, to denounce corrupt politicians, or challenge young people to remain chaste and pursue godly goals. Some may not listen, but others will. If they do, you will be helping them find true happiness and avoid spiritual, physical, and emotional pain.

Like John the Baptist and Fr. Alfred Delp, we are called to be voices crying out in the desert, preparing the way for the Lord to come into our own hearts, and into the lives and situations around us. Like Fr. Delp and Mtr. Martha, we are to rejoice always, even though the extent of our personal problems—or our culture that is so filled with death, cruelty, and violence—may seem overwhelming. These trials *will* all come to an end.

Meanwhile, our hope is a *living* and *active* hope, rooted in Christ Himself, who by His life, death and resurrection has defeated the powers of death, sin, and hell. He has given us the promise of eternal life, as well as the assurance that justice *will* ultimately prevail.

As St. Peter reminds us in his First Letter (1:3-9 NRSV):

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

“Although you have not seen Him, you love Him, and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Alleluia, Amen!

So this day—if not every day—*rejoice!* Smile and be glad. Go home and watch a funny movie. Make someone else laugh. Spread the joy of Jesus everywhere you go. How *else* are we to prepare for Christmas? After all, none of those presents, cards, trees, lights, cookies, or candy canes mean anything without Christ.³

Amen? Amen!

¹ “The July 20 Plot,” 7 December 2023, [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20_July_plot#:~:text=The%20leader%20of%20the%20conspiracy,only%20dealt%20Hitler%20minor%20injuries.>) < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20_July_plot#:~:text=The%20leader%20of%20the%20conspiracy,only%20dealt%20Hitler%20minor%20injuries.> 11 December 2023.

² Adapt. Peter West, “Homily for Gaudete Sunday (Third Sunday of Advent, Year B),” <<http://frwest.blogspot.com/2008/12/homily-for-gaudete-sunday-third-sunday.html>> 12 December 2014.

³ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “Get Your Pink On,” 14 December 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.