

At the beginning of Advent, I told my staff that we needed to decorate the Newman Center for Advent and Christmas even though the students are only here for half of Advent and classes start the day after the Baptism of our Lord, the last day of the Christmas season

So Andrew Heller and I settled on a nice candle holder that held the four candles for Advent and a white candle in the middle for Christmas

As a former engineer, I like to believe that this candle holder went straight from design to production - why do I say this? - because the candle holder doesn't work in reality - maybe it looked good on the drawing board, but it doesn't work in reality - the candles are too close together and they tend to melt the candle next to them - so we have had to constantly replace candles throughout Advent - so the other day, I committed the liturgical mortal sin of saying to Andrew, "We need to replace the pink candle." - as you may know from past homilies <and bulletin articles> that I am very adamant that there is no pink in the Catholic Church - it is rose, not pink

So to refresh your memory, on Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday in Advent, and Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, priest can wear rose, not pink, colored vestments - other rose colored items can be placed around the church as well - such as a rose colored candle during Advent - Gaudete Sunday appears halfway through Advent and Laetare Sunday appears halfway through Lent

Again, Gaudete means to "rejoice" - in the readings we hear a lot about joy and rejoicing - in the first reading we hear from Zephaniah

The first thing I thought of when I read today's first reading was Covid - when Covid first started we couldn't see anyone in person - we couldn't gather - we had to shut down Masses - the Bishop had to dispense everyone from the obligation to go to Mass - which has been lifted except for those who are elderly and anyone else who fears for their health - so if you are not coming to Mass, but going to Walmart, you have incurred a mortal sin by not going to Mass - anyways, every Mass is a foretaste of heaven, but there was something special about the first couple of Masses back together - there was something special about the freedom to celebrate the Mass in person again

In a similar way, in the first reading God was saying through Zephaniah that the good days were going to return - earlier, Zephaniah had prophesied doom and gloom - this came true in the 70 year Babylonian exile of the Judah, the southern kingdom - but after those 70 years, Judah would be restored - when that happens, there will again be joy in Jerusalem - parents don't rejoice in punishment - or at least they shouldn't - but they should rejoice when their children learn their lesson, change their ways, and life and harmony are restored

In the same way, God was being a good father to Judah - things were so bad that He allowed them to be punished, to be defeated and exiled by the Babylonians - but after 70 years, after the proper punishment, the good times were going to happen once again

In the Gospel, John the Baptist is out and about - crowds are drawn to him - why? - because he was not preaching something feel good - no, he was telling people they needed to repent and change their ways - in today's Gospel,

he tells them they need to give away their extra cloak, their extra food - the tax collectors needed to stop being greedy and collecting extra taxes - the soldiers needed to quit extorting and falsely accusing people  
We need to quit making excuses for our behavior - we need to change - we need to start doing what is right - we need to do what is holy

I'm including myself, but I think as a society we are so good at being busy and entertained that we can easily ignore problems in our lives

This allows us to be content, but sometimes it can get in the way of being happy or truly joyful - it's like someone who needs surgery and is in constant dull pain, but refuses to get the surgery - yes, the surgery would be an increase in pain, but it would be temporary - the better life is the life after surgery, but it is easy to become familiar and content with the pain - it is cheaper spiritually and psychologically just to keep doing what we're doing

But Jesus did not come to give us coping mechanisms - He came to give us life to the full - as John proclaimed 2000 years ago, despite their great expectations, he was not the promised Christ - he said there would be someone after him that is mightier than he was - this mighty person would baptize not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire

And this is the great secret - we are called to change - we are called to holiness within the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ - we do not have to do it on our own - Jesus Christ gives us the fire of the Holy Spirit at our Baptism - and He offers it to us everyday if we are willing to accept it

We are born with Original Sin - we are born in opposition to God - our baptism changes us - it removes the stain of original sin and makes us sons or daughters of God - it gives us saving grace - it gives us the grace we need to get to heaven - as we grow older, as we reach the age of reason, about the age of 7, we can start to exercise our free will and reason to either accept or reject that saving grace - every time we accept or reject God's saving grace, it changes us - it changes us either for the better or for the worse

Again, I think we can become blind to these subtle changes in our souls - we are too busy and entertained to recognize the subtle changes in our souls when we do good or bad - I believe a lot of us go through life with this subtle pain in our souls

This is not what God wants for us - He wants us to live life to the full - He wants us to rejoice - rejoice because He created us - rejoice because He redeemed us - rejoice because He died on the Cross for our sins and rose from the dead so that we might have eternal life in heaven

So I encourage you to slow down, to rejoice in the Lord always because, as St. Paul said to the Philippians, "the Lord is near."

So I encourage you to slow down and pray - as St. Paul continues, in prayer, with a thankful heart, make your requests to God - I encourage you to slow down and pray - bring your problems in your life before God - allow Him to punish

you if He needs to - if we slow down and address our problems with God in prayer, we will know a peace that surpasses all understanding - this peace, in Christ, will guard our hearts and minds

A slow and prayerful life completely open and vulnerable to the refining love of Christ is better than the anxiety-filled, walls up life, fear driven constant motion life so many of us live - just like the people in the Gospel, we may need to change our life patterns - we may need to slow down

I pray as we continue this hectic time of the year, we will take time to slow down and let God and others love us - I pray we slow down enough so that we can pray and receive healing to our problems from God - allow God's love to change us - the Lord truly wants us to rejoice - to have a spirit of joy - to be free of anxiety - to have a peace that surpasses all understanding

Just as Zephaniah says that God rejoices over Jerusalem, we are the new Jerusalem - God rejoices over us - slow down and share in God's joy for you