

By Father Charles Bowes

Zephaniah 3:14-18a
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18

Sadness qualifies us for Christmas joy

Don't worry; be happy. So we've always been advised on the third Sunday of Advent. Crank up the jollies. Rejoice. Cheer up.

What if you don't feel like it? What if you feel besieged? Overworked, overwrought, tired, cramped and alone?

For me the Christmas season always has a sad note about it...my father died on the 23rd of December almost thirty years ago. So every season has about it that melancholy memory. A real sadness.

Sometimes the most useless thing to say to a sad person is, "Snap out of it." Yet today this is what the Liturgy of the Word seems to insist on. The prophet Zephaniah tells the timid, disheartened people: "Fear not! Be not discouraged. ...God will rejoice over you with gladness." As simple as that.

To rub it in, the Psalmist, Isaiah 12, despite our fears and weaknesses, cheerily demands that we cry out with joy, that we be confident and unafraid. You might as well say, "Have a happy day," or pass out smile buttons.

So Saint Paul is just as bad in his letter to the Philippians chapter 4. To a bickering, fearful and restless community he writes, "Be unselfish. Dismiss

anxiety from your minds. Just trust our God and present your needs." Then the Church, supposedly, will be flooded with peace, understanding, and harmony.

But what if it doesn't work? What if Advent doesn't take? What if things get worse or the pain does not let up?

Advent's themes of happiness and hope can annoy someone who hurts. When we are burdened with self preoccupation, or with the weight of anxieties, forced joy and canned glee disgust the best of persons.

Yet it is nothing but our diminishment, our losses, our sadness, our weight of sin that Advent confronts and calls us out of. Somehow it is the weight of our own melancholy that must be laughed away. It is our sense of exile, our cramped confinement, our psychic baggage that is to be burned off by the fire of love. The very stuff we wish we didn't have qualifies us for Christmas.

The crowds John encountered had little reason for joy. Aware of their own need for deliverance, they felt a glimmer of anticipation that he might be the Messiah. He counseled justice and rectitude, but the promise he spoke of was something far more than they might have suspected or wanted: "I am baptizing you with water, but there is one to come who is mightier than I. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. His

winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.”

I used to think this passage referred to the contrast between the saved and the lost. My prayer was to be in the happy granary, not burnt up in fire.

But over the years I've come to realize that this is clearly a misreading of John the Baptist's words. The fire is part of the baptism in Jesus and his Spirit. Fire is not the fate of the lost, but the refining of the blessed. We all have our chaff, our dross, our waste. We all have our winnowing. And it is the fire of Christ that will burn it away. The burdens we carry do not make us unfit for Advent's message. They qualify us as prime candidates.

So bring all the struggles and the doubts, the hurts, the fears – the ill health and quarrels – bring it all to the table of the one bread and one cup. Let the Crucified be seen as our best self so unjustly nailed but in whose outstretched arms we are embraced in our kindred suffering. The very stuff we grieve and lament becomes our ticket to freedom and hope in the Incarnate Word whose flesh was every bit our own. That's reason for rejoicing.

There's a story told about a couple who had died

and gone to heaven. After being there for some time, they marveled at how wonderful it was. The husband then turned to his wife and said, “Just think, I could have been here ten years ago if you hadn't made me eat all that oat bran.”

So, don't stop eating the oat bran. The sufferings of the present are the very things that make us part of Jesus. The bread and wine we receive at the table make us into themselves – the Body of Christ. God is as close as our very hearts. And that is cause for rejoicing.

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