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# Healing Gifts Cultivate Joy

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### **Third Sunday of Advent**

Sunday Readings for December 13, 2009 for Cycle C:

Zep 3:14-18; Is 12:2-6; Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18

### **HEALING GIFTS CULTIVATE JOY**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

The greetings extended within a culture as people come and go provide an indication of the values shared by members of the group. The biblical greetings "The Lord be with you" (Ruth 2:4) or "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:21) have profound resonances in the liturgy; in Catholic cultures these wishes or similar phrases were repeated throughout the day. Unfortunately much of this echo of worship has been lost. How many of the ordinary people who say "Good-bye" to a friend realize that it means "God be with you?" Upon reflection, we find shallow modern attempts at variety to indicate sincerity and thoughtfulness. "Have a nice day!" or "Enjoy!" are expressions that show a belief in the goodness of life that should be shared. However, God-centered greetings are much richer.

The Church endeavors to teach that life is to be enjoyed, not in a self-centered, individualistic manner, but through a community aware that all true joy and happiness is a gift of God. Moreover, this is the very goal of life itself: from an understanding of Emmanuel (God is with us), we come into a union with God that constitutes everlasting joy.

The popular Latin name for this Sunday is "Gaudete! Rejoice in the Lord always!" (Phil 4:4). The new lectionary introduces us into the milieu of Jewish worship from which St. Paul derived his teaching. The exuberance with which the people of Israel approached the Temple in prayer is so pervasive that one finds 27 words for joy in the Hebrew Bible. The short passage of Zephaniah (a prophet in Judah during the seventh century BC) contains eight synonyms for joy. First, one notes that it is a community experience, Zion and Jerusalem being personifications of the capital city and, therefore representing the entire people. The reasons for the call to rejoice are significant: first, God has forgiven the sins of the people, and in ceasing to judge them he brings peace; secondly, God is acknowledged to be their King and dwells in their midst. No longer should the people fear the oppression of enemies nor should they be discouraged by misfortunes. Their King is a mighty Savior, delivering them from all dangers and renewing their lives by his love.

When Luke described the coming of John the Baptist and of Jesus, he pointedly situated their work in the historical reign of Tiberius Caesar. Readers should not forget the oppressive presence of the Romans in the Holy Land of those days! How fervent were the prayers that God would manifest his royal might as when he delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery! John quoted the prophet of old (Is 40:1-5) that indeed God would come soon; to prepare, people must seek forgiveness for their sins and live righteous lives. By this John meant that the right order desired by God must be achieved by keeping the commandments and imitating divine generosity.

John then explained that his work was a preparation for the coming of God's anointed One (Messiah). He stressed that the long-awaited Son of David would possess the gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to exercise the royal prerogative of judging everyone (see Is 11:1-5). Bringing justice and righteousness to the daily lives of all would be the basis for a reign for peace that would extend even to the wild animals and reptiles that often threaten life and limb (Is 11:6-9).

After John was imprisoned by Herod Antipas, the great prophet seemed to become impatient with Jesus. His disciples asked: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Lk 7:19). In other words, when are you going to begin the ominous task of judgment? Jesus replied by quoting other passages of Isaiah. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them" (Lk 7:22; see Is 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). These are signs that God's reign of peace and wholeness (*shalom*) is coming upon the world. The healing presence of Christ in our midst is the great source of a profound joy and peace that fulfills all human hopes, while surpassing all understanding (Phil 4:7)