

DECEMBER 17, 2017 – Third Sunday of Advent
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In a previous life I used to travel a lot. When I was in Colombia or Costa Rica and they asked where I'm from I'd say "the United States." When I'm back visiting my family in Baltimore and someone asks where I live I answer "Illinois." I was at a funeral downstate in Dwight and I told them I was from Chicago. If I was visiting the Lincoln Park Zoo and some asked about my home I'd say "the South Side." If I am at Mercy Hospital and somebody asks where I live I say "29th and Wabash." And if I should happen to end up long ago in a galaxy far, far away and some Wookiee asked where I was from I'd say "Planet Earth." You need to know where you are in order to know where you fit.

All of which says something about John the Baptist. The people kept trying to situate him not so much geographically but spiritually: are you the light? No. the Christ? No. Elijah? No. The Prophet? No. "I am the voice." John situates himself, finds his place, knows where he belongs. "I am the voice." A voice makes some noise. A voice breaks the silence. A voice demands attention. That was the Baptist's role. To shake things up a bit, to yell "Hey, you." The Gospel passage is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Old time-y Catholics will remember that back in the day we would end every mass with the "last

gospel” where the priest would read (in Latin!) from that same the first chapter of John’s Gospel. The opening sentence? “In the beginning was the Word.” Jesus is the Word and John the Baptist is the Voice. A voice works best when it speaks a word but a word differs from a voice. A word has content. A word conveys meaning. A word is designed to communicate. A voice can carry a word but the voice fades and the word endures. A voice belongs to the speaker. A word belongs both to the speaker and to the hearer. So when the fourth Gospel sets up this contrast the evangelist is telling us something significant about how Jesus fits and how the Baptist fits. The Baptist has that grab you by the lapel and slap your face attention-getting quality about him. Jesus has the whisper in your ear and get let in on a secret type vibe. The voice is important but it is the word that endures.

What is the word, then? What does Jesus want us to understand which is deeper than merely grabbing our attention? Say the magic word and you will one hundred dollars and the word of the day is “rejoice.” Rejoice, says the prophet Isaiah. “I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul.” Rejoice, says Saint Paul. In fact, we should rejoice always according to the apostle. And here is our dilemma. How are we to rejoice in a world so full of trouble! How are we to rejoice when there is cancer and dementia and heart attacks and, yes, even the flu? How are we to

rejoice when the bills keep getting larger and larger and the cash keeps getting smaller and smaller? How are we to rejoice when there is division, dissension, disillusion, disagreement, discord, dissonance, disenchantment, discontent, disappointment, dissatisfaction, disheartenment, displeasure, discomfort, and distress. How to overcome all that? According to the Baptist the reasons we can rejoice no matter how things seem to be going are two-fold. First, "there is one among you whom you do not recognize." Second, "there is one coming after me." In other words, there is cause for joy in the present since one is already among us. And there is cause for joy in the future since one is coming. So in these last days before Christmas Advent invites us to step back from the noise and find the joys.

We are not surprised to hear that there joy in waiting for the one who is coming. Advent is the season of waiting, of watching, of hoping. The image of the season is the pregnant mother. We would have to get a mother to testify about her experience but for the rest of us there is a built in joy in seeing an expectant mother. During the months long wait there is a sense of excitement that grows together with the coming of new life. You occasionally hear a pregnant woman say "I am so ready for this baby to come" but you can't rush things. They take their time. The baby comes when

it is good and ready. So we have the joy of know that God is coming to make all things new... but in God's time not ours.

What is surprising is the word of the Baptist that joy is already in our midst unrecognized. We don't recognize because of our preconception of what it will be like to get the joy. I will be filled with joy once X happens. (Good health, happy family, secure income – you fill in the blank.) But think on this: have you ever seen a child get a toy for Christmas ... and end up playing with the box. Because children have an imagination even if what was in the box was not what they wanted they can still have a good time. Too often we fret and fume because we expect this, that or the other and when it doesn't happen we go into a funk. The reality is that Jesus is in our midst gifting us with joy if we have the eyes to see it. Once we get over our expectations of what we **want** in order to be joy-filled, they we will discover that we already have exactly what we **need** in order to enter into joy. So there is our prayer homework for this last week before Christmas – be on the lookout for joy, hidden in plain sight. A lone snow flake, a child caroling, a card from an old friend – today is the day to be surprised by joy.