

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice” (Phil 4:4). On this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, we quote Saint Paul from his letter to the Philippians. Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi while he was in prison and in danger of death. The fact that he is under house arrest for preaching Christ does not weigh him down at all. Paul rejoices because he is doing God’s work and that brings an inner peace. Paul rejoices in proclaiming Christ for this will result in true deliverance ... freedom from sin, freedom from despair, freedom from death, freedom for eternity. Paul is fully committed to Jesus so that whether he lives or dies, Christ will be magnified in his body. When we humble ourselves to let God be in control, we find an inner peace and joy that cannot be stripped away by any struggle or cross in life.

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice.” “A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (John 1: 6-7). When we recall the life of John the Baptist, we cannot help but think of its very beginning and the 2<sup>nd</sup> joyful mystery. John is in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. Jesus is in the womb of his mother Mary. John cannot yet speak or cry, but from within the womb he intuitively senses and understands he is in the presence the Son of God. There is a joy that radiates from Mary, a joy that radiates from Elizabeth, indeed a joy that radiates from each womb. “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1:41-42). Life is a wonderful gift, an occasion for joy.

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice.” Mary expresses her joy over the Annunciation and the Visitation in the Magnificat prayer. She is happy not simply for herself but for everyone who is lifted by the coming of the Messiah:

- “My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior” (Lk 46-47). Each human is created in the likeness and image of God. Each life is sacred to God and each member of the Trinity wishes to spend eternity with you. What a wonderful reason to rejoice.
- The lowly are singled out for God’s favor. God lifts up the oppressed. He protects and defends. Even if the rich and powerful of this world are against you, that is nothing compared to having the Almighty in your corner, rooting for you, caring for you, your personal champion. “Then I will rejoice in the LORD, exult in God’s salvation. My very bones shall say, ‘O LORD, who is like you, who rescue the afflicted from the powerful, the afflicted and needy from the despoiler?’” (Ps 35:9-10).
- We hunger for justice. We thirst for righteousness. And yet we live in a world where the rich seem to become richer, the poor seem to suffer without end. Jesus, the Messiah is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies. “The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” (Luke 1:53-55).
- For those who seek his mercy, every act of foolishness will be wiped away, every act of disobedience forgiven. Mary, whose heart will ache at his passion and death, magnifies joy more than any other human at the coming of Jesus for it means salvation for the sinner.

Five days ago, Margaret Keenan of Great Britain received the first injection of the Covid-19 vaccine from Pfizer. This 91-year-old responded with joy. “It’s the best early birthday present I could wish for because it means I can finally look forward to spending time with my family and

friends in the new year, after being on my own for most of the year.” She can see a light at the end of the tunnel to the long period of isolation and protection. “Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice.”

And what of the millions for whom the arrival of a vaccine comes too late. Let us look through the eyes of faith of our own bishop. Don Zielinski, newly diagnosed with the Covid-19 virus, died on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. In the bishop’s own words:

We could tell as his breathing slowed that the end of his earthly journey was near. During his last moments, I prayed the prayers for the dying, the prayer of commendation, the rosary and Apostolic pardon. I read John 14: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places... I will come back and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” At the conclusion of these words, he literally took his last breath.

I looked at my sister and her eyes were wide opened and her mouth. We never doubted God’s power, but we were struck to the core of our soul at this crescendo of the symphony of life of Don Zielinski, our beloved father and dear husband to our mother. Like the three magi who encountered Christ at his birth and went home a different route, my sister and I encountered Christ and left different people, powerfully changed by this sacred encounter of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection.

Death brings on much grief, but it is not the end. Eternal joy awaits those who have died in God’s graces. “Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice.”