I love the Third Sunday of Advent, don’t you? (And it’s not just because we get to wear these really fashionable pink, a.k.a. rose, vestments!) No, it’s because we’re getting closer to what Advent prepares our hearts for in the first place: the celebration of the coming of the Savior, Christ the Lord! The Advent Wreath is 3/4 lit! And the Scripture Readings we’ve just heard turn our hearts and minds to all the reasons why we should be filled with Joy---that is, why we should be “Joy-full”!

The first two weeks of Advent have been focused on the sense of expectation and longing for the “coming of the Lord”; today, God’s Word overflows with the message that the Lord is near---our waiting is just about over; our longing is coming to an end. So,... are you? Are you “excited”?----Are you “filled with joy”?

I think we might all agree that we Catholics tend to “struggle” a bit with expressing much emotion when it comes to our Faith lives. Maybe that’s because we focus so much importance on being “respectful” when we’re here in Church: we enter the Church quietly, we genuflect fully aware of Jesus’ Presence in the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle, we kneel to pray our personal prayers before Mass and maintain a respectful silence so others can do so as well. Throughout the Mass, we conscientiously participate in all the prayers and songs. And in the process, perhaps we somehow draw the conclusion that it’s not respectful to be Joyful. But that’s absolutely not the case. Of course, we don’t express our Joy here in Church the same way you might do at a Michigan or Michigan State Home Football game. But we also need to realize that we have far greater reasons to be “filled with Joy” here in Church than when our home team wins a game; and that’s because our God is here with us; He has come to save us; He has redeemed us from our sins; we are destined to live Eternal Life in Heaven. However we express that JOY, we need to be filled with it.

We also need to realize that being Joy-full doesn’t mean that our lives are problem-less. Those are two different realities. There’s no doubt that as we come together here for Mass, all of us are more than likely dealing with any number of real, challenging, and possibly quite serious problems in our lives. For young children, this time of year can create a lot of anxiety because of the anticipation and excitement, realizing that in less than two weeks, Santa will be
coming; the anticipation of that joyful event gets harder and harder to contain. Others of us may be anxious about trying to get all our shopping done and other preparations taken care of. We might be dealing with financial challenges due to rising inflation and other economic challenges; and the continuing worries about the Pandemic and the confusion and uncertainty surrounding all of that. And of course on top of any of those, there could be health concerns, or other serious family issues we’re trying to manage. So, when we hear St. Paul tell us this morning: “Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God”, we might find that rather difficult to “hear”.

As important as all those tasks and projects on our “to-do” list are, and the challenges we are coping with are real, it’s important to keep everything in perspective. Our Faith, and these remaining days of Advent, definitely can help us to find that “perspective”, and even to experience Joy in the midst of Anxiety. We’re always going to face problems, difficulties or challenges in our lives; that’s part of Life. But, that doesn’t mean that we can’t also be filled with Joy.

To accomplish that, we need to focus much more of our attention on the spiritual dimension of what Christmas is all about. To realize that Christmas celebrates the greatest event in the history of the world when 2,000 years ago, the Word of God became Flesh, and began making His dwelling among us. Therefore, Christmas is the Cause of our Joy; it is that which gives us the reason to be joyful all the time, no matter what other circumstances are taking place in our lives or in our world, not because of the twinkling lights and exchanging of gifts, but rather because Christmas celebrates the fact that our God has come to be with us---and He will never leave us.

That’s why we should always be doing what the Prophet Zephaniah told us to do in today’s First Reading: “Shout for joy….sing joyfully….be glad and exult with all your heart.” Why? Because the God of Heaven and Earth loves us. Or to put it in the words of today’s Responsorial Psalm: “Cry out with joy and gladness for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel.” That’s also why we should do what St. Paul tells us: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again, rejoice!” Even with all that we have to do, and in spite of whatever other problems or worries we’re dealing with, we still need to: “Rejoice always!”

Today, we have two powerful examples of Joy from whom we can learn. The first is John the Baptist, who was the central figure in today’s Gospel Reading.
Although he was a unique individual, and lived a rather austere and unusual life, he was clearly a person who was “confident” and “filled with Joy”. He couldn’t contain his message: “Repent, because the Kingdom of God is at hand.” He preached to everyone, and never hesitated to tell people “like it is”. And as we heard today, everyone—“the crowds”, the “tax collectors”, the “soldiers”----everyone kept coming to him to ask him: “What shall we do?” John’s answer was not to command them to do anything wildly extraordinary; he just told them to treat one another with kindness, with charity, and with justice. So, we can be pretty certain that if we would ask that same question today: “What should we do?”, John’s answer to us would be the same---practical and concrete was to live with Joy!

The second example of Joy that I would hold up for us to consider today is Our Blessed Mother, more specifically, Our Lady of Guadalupe. As you know, today, December 12th, is the normal Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, except (like this year) when it falls on a Sunday. In 1531, Our Lady appeared several times to a humble, native Aztec man, St. Juan Diego, in Mexico, which at that time, was a pagan country. On 3 different occasions, Juan Diego went to the Bishop at Our Lady’s urging, to ask him to build a Church on Tepeyac Hill. But the Bishop was not very open to Juan’s requests (you know how “those Bishops can be”!), until the day when Juan brought the Bishop bunch of roses (which was itself a minor miracle because it was not the season for roses to bloom), and when he opened his “tilma”/his cloak to present the roses, there was also the image of Our Lady, dressed as a native Aztec woman, pregnant with Jesus. That’s when the Bishop was convinced, and he built the Church in Guadalupe, which to this day still contains that “tilma” with our Blessed Mother’s image on it for Pilgrims to see and venerate. And those appearances by Our Lady of Guadalupe became the reason for practically the entire country to convert to the Catholic faith. Our Lady of Guadalupe is the Patroness of South, Central and North America; and she is truly the Cause of our Joy, as she brought forth the Son of God to be our Savior.

Joy is a virtue not an emotion. Joy comes from the way we share ourselves in Love with others. Joy does not result from what others do to make us “feel” joyful; Joy results when we know (believe) that we are loved, and when we choose to love others as God loves us. And when we have that virtue of Joy, we can also choose to not be influenced by the negativity and divisiveness going on all around us; we can choose to see one another as God sees us, and to treat one another accordingly. To make that kind of “choice” isn’t easy; in fact, it requires
Divine help, which we are given through the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. “Joy” is one of the **Fruits** of the Holy Spirit that shows itself in the actions of our lives. St. Paul’s strong encouragement for us to “**Rejoice in the Lord always**” is very good advice. We see in John the Baptist, and Our Lady of Guadalupe, two people who lived truly joy-filled lives, despite the problems and challenges they faced. They too urge us to “rejoice in the Lord always”; they too urge us to seek the Lord in all we do”, and they urge us to be joyful witnesses to Jesus in all that we say and do.

And we do that, not by doing anything wildly extraordinary, but by doing what we are supposed to do with Joy; by treating one another, beginning with those in our families, and including all those we encounter every day, with kindness, charity and justice. Just think what a powerful difference there would be in our world if we all actually did that!

We need to remember: God is not just **near**; He is **here**! He is inside each of us; He is right here among us. And in just minutes, Jesus will be truly and really Present in the Holy Eucharist. Our God makes Himself so accessible that He gives Himself to us in His Body and Blood to be our Food and Drink. With our hearts full of Joy, let us continue to make St. Paul’s beautiful words of encouragement to us today be a part of everything we do---every Christmas card we write, every gift we wrap, every choice we make, every thought we think, every breath we take: **“Rejoice in the Lord always; I say it again, Rejoice!”**

God bless you, now and always!