

Take Joy Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28; Psalm 126 12-11-2011

It seems that every Advent season, when we come to the Sunday on which we light the pink candle, the Candle of Joy, I reflect on the beautiful words written by Fra Giovanni, which are:

I salute you! There is nothing I can give you which you have not;

But there is much that, while I cannot give, you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it today.

Take Heaven.

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant.

Take Peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet within our reach is joy.

Take Joy.

And so, at this Christmas time, I greet you, with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and the shadows flee away.

What a beautiful thought⁶ for us in this day and age—the wish that the day breaks on whatever it is that troubles us and the shadows flee away. The wish that we will wake up tomorrow and discover that, once again, “God’s in his heaven and all is right with the world.”

We can move toward this sense of freedom from the darkness by thinking of the words Paul wrote to the small church in Thessalonica. He told them they should, “rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks for all circumstances.” Through doing this they would find joy in life.

Their lives were not easy, they had to resist much as they awaited the second coming of Jesus. They had to endure persecution for being followers of his new way. And, yet, in the face of death, they were to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks.”

We are worlds away from those early followers, but Paul’s words apply to us today.

Joy dwells deep within those who possess it. It is not the same thing as happiness. Instead, it is an everlasting sense that all will be well no matter what it is we may be facing now. Happiness seems to come and go with the winds of change around us. But no matter how we may be buffeted by those winds, and although weeping may

linger for the night, we will find joy does come with the morning. Joy, along with hope and love, never is defeated in a heart that has faith.

Whether we have joy or not depends on the way we look at life and the stresses it brings us. If we choose to look at the glass as being half, or more, full, it is. If we choose to look at it as half empty, it is.

We do not always realize it, but the way we think is the way we are. People with a positive outlook on life take others by their hearts and souls and lift them up with them. People who only dwell in the gloom and doom of life, try to drag others down to where they are. They illustrate the old adage that tells us "Misery loves company." They love nothing better than to have others join them in the chorus of "Nothing is going right, we are doomed." Often we find ourselves spending too much time with those who love to revel in worst-case scenarios. When we choose to do this we find ourselves fighting to regain a sense of balance and we wonder where it is we have lost our faith and hope and energy. It is exhausting to be in the company of those who are negative. When we dwell in their world we defeat ourselves and begin to slide backward. We resist finding joy in life and taking it into our hearts.

As many of you know, I believe in letting go of incessant worry and the need to have things go according to my small plans. There is a far bigger picture unfolding all around us and we need to pause a bit and see what it may bring. All our pushing and pulling, nudging and whining only leads us to turmoil within and without.

But, how do we manage to step back a bit and let things unfold? Paul gave us a clue. He told that tiny church to look for all the things that were right in their world and not to dwell on what they perceived as wrong. He encouraged it to a kinder, gentler way of doing things, to see areas of gray and not just to see in black and white.

Instead of looking for everything in life that could go wrong or that drags us down, we need to look for those things that bring us the very best. Paul tells us that by doing this, the God of peace will be with us. Who among us does not desire peace for our minds and souls?

On the huge banquet table of life, we are allowed to pick and choose those things that are beautiful and fair and full of joy and we are allowed to think on them to the exclusion of things that are not so lovely.

This doesn't mean that we bumble through life thoughtlessly but that we move forward with a positive perspective on things knowing

that our task is to be people who seek to raise everyone up and not bring them down. We need to understand that our job is to consider the pathway that lies before us and choose to take the one that leads us forward in trust in a God, who has never failed us in the past and who never will fail us in the present.

Jesus brought this message to his immediate followers and to us. To continue to move his message of hope, peace, joy and love forward he could not stop too long to worry a problem to death. Instead of doing so, he “took joy” in the simple living of life, in serving others with a gentle and willing heart and manner and in always serving his God. He urged those who would follow him to do the same.

So, in this often stressful and very busy season of life, when there are a million details and concerns that tug on us, remember to “take joy” from the wonderful banquet of life set before us. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks for all circumstances” in life. Then, think of that baby in the manger and let him, like babies everywhere, light up your life with joy.

Amen