

Joy **Advent: Third Week**

A priest, rabbi and vicar walk into a bar. The barman says, "Is this some kind of joke?"

According to one website, this is one of the funniest jokes ever told.

I was having dinner with Garry Kasparov and there was a checked tablecloth. It took him two hours to pass me the salt.

Another one from another list. There are a number of funniest joke lists. Puns. Ethnic jokes. Elephant jokes. Off-color jokes. All kinds of jokes to appeal to the wide range of senses of humor. Some say that having a sense of humor distinguishes human beings from other creatures. I believe it. People are very funny, and they like to laugh. On social media, people will post memes in reaction to notable events or people, and many are very funny. Seeing that redeems one's faith in humanity.

We need to be amused, to be entertained, to enjoy the lighter side of life. But laughter is more than being tickled by a gag or joke. A sense of humor offers perspective, helping us stand outside of the everyday to see life in a different way, to see that there are more dimensions to being human than meet the eye. There is even something called dark humor that helps us look at subjects that are serious or tragic in a way that shields us from what can be painful.

Being amused is different from being happy, although they certainly overlap. Happiness is a different reality from amusement. The feeling of happiness is associated with feelings of contentment, satisfaction, fulfillment and it may result from even simple activities such as spending time with friends, playing sports or games, conquering a challenge, taking in nature, partaking in a favorite meal, and so forth. In many ways, happiness is the goal of each of our days, and of our entire lives.

There is a fragility to happiness. It can disappear for all sorts of reasons. A sickness. A death. A downward turn of fortunes. Being overtaken by forces such as war or famine that are well beyond the power of individuals. Happiness is a treasured state, but it can be fleeting.

The philosopher Aristotle made happiness central to his thinking on what it means for humans to live a full life. His definition of happiness reaches past what we normally think of happiness as a feeling of contentment. Aristotle saw happiness as something that characterizes a person's entire life. He understood happiness to be a result of seeking the virtuous life, that is, of pursuing the best in us. In that way, Aristotle's idea of happiness as something more lasting approaches what St. Paul names as one of the fruits of the Spirit, that is, one of the traits of the person who is filled with God's presence, and that is, joy. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity." (Galatians 5:22-23)

The Third Week of Advent is dedicated to joy. Traditionally, the Third Sunday of Advent was named as "Gaudete Sunday" using the Latin word meaning, "rejoice." The Bible reading in the services in most Christian churches for Gaudete Sunday this year is from another of Paul's

letters, this one to the community in Philippi, in which he exhorts the people to employ this gift of joy: “Rejoice in the Lord, always! I say it again, rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).

Joy goes beyond amusement and happiness. Joy is a lasting disposition. Joy arises from an understanding of what is most important in life and embracing all that really matters, which is another way of saying taking into our lives all that is holy, all that is an incarnation of divine life. Joy remains through ups and downs, the positive and the negative, whatever might lift us up or crush us.

The season that leads us to the celebration of the incarnation of the divine, that is the birth of Jesus, gives us a chance to open ourselves to joy. Paul wants that for his community at Philippi and we are recipients of his wish as well when we hear his words read from his letter to the Philippians: “Finally, my brothers and sisters, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous, or worthy of praise.” In that same passage, he offers this promise, “Then God’s own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over you hearts and minds.” (see Philippians 4:4-7)