

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 12, 2021

Reflection by Sister Pat Coughlin, OSB, D.Min

Zep 3:14-18a; Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18

We have two reasons to celebrate today. Not only do we have Gaudate Sunday, we also have La Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, two reasons to rejoice. This day is not a reason to engage in frivolity-many people have died in the tornadoes that tore through areas south of us yesterday; the earth is in danger and we go for short term gain rather than ensuring the future of our children; polarization infects family dinner tables; diversity is a call for division rather than an invitation to learning; and there's the pandemic. Many of us feel overwhelmed by the amount of suffering in our midst. Brian Williams closed his final broadcast as an anchor on MSNBC with "The darkness at the edge of town has moved into our streets, our highways and our neighborhoods.

But the scriptures to day urge us to rejoice: Zephaniah tells us that, after many prophecies of gloom, doom and punishment, God forgives Israel for their infidelity and bursts into joy and delight as the scattered captives return from Babylon and are welcomed home.

Paul writes joyfully from a prison cell and tells the suffering community at Philippi to rejoice **now**, no matter what because God is near them right now, no waiting for the future. Paul outlines some spiritual practices that bring joy and transform lives rather than separating people and putting others down. We can hear his exhortation as an unrealistic sort of Pollyanna religion that ignores suffering. It's not. That kind of religion can lead us into addictions, ideologies, attachments, neuroses as efforts to flee from suffering and remain unconscious, infantile and dependent. Better to sit with what's uncomfortable in life and discern what it has to teach us.

John certainly doesn't seem to be a joyful figure, but he comes with good news. The crowds that come to hear him are suffering from Roman oppression and long for a savior. He doesn't call for joy. He calls for repentance because repentance calls us into a new life and a new relationship with God. Repentance is not feeling bad about what we have done in the past; it's living in a new way. John gives the crowd practices of repentance that fit who they are and the harm they have done: if you have more than you need share it; stop stealing from your neighbors; stop using your power to the advantage of the powerless.

And what about Guadalupe? Carmen Nanko Fernandez Professor of Hispanic Theology and Ministry at CTU says, "Today is a fiesta-a time to affirm the gift of life, a time we are accompanied by the Divine. Fiestas are not escapes from daily misery, but necessary acts of resistance to suffering, acts of re-remembering (as in putting back together). and restoration. The spirit of fiesta permeates Guadalupe with Song. So the fiesta along with today's scripture celebrate the presence of the Divine in daily life through trial and suffering, through worries and burdens, through peace and restoration."

Carmen's image of a troubadour God singing at festivals has an echo in C.S. Lewis' sixth book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Jesuit John Foley recounts the passage in which the children are taken back to the moment of creation . They hear the voice of The lion Aslan, the Christ figure, singing in the wilderness. "When the voice goes high, birds, clouds, blue sky appear and the mountains raise their heads laboriously. A low hum vibrates forth from the depths of the sea. Creation seems to be made out of melody.

John Foley asks, “How about this for a possibility? God’s gladness sings out joyfully at every instant, and the song is the earth, the galaxies, the people and plants and chemicals and soaring hawks and encircling planets, droplets of dew and heavy black holes, youthful beauties, ancient wisdoms and everything that exists.”

May you have a day of joy and a future of many sing-alongs.

Pat Coughlin, OSB, D.Min