

Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

Zeph 3:14-18a

Is 12 *passim*

Phil 4:4-7

Lk 3:10-18

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The past, the present, and the future walked into a bar. . . . It was tense.

Now that I have you thinking about verb tenses, let's talk about Advent. Advent is the season of joyful hope. The English language lets us hope backwards. We say things like, "I hope you had a good time yesterday." Not so with the French language. The rules of French permit them to hope only in the future tense. "I hope you *will* have a good time tomorrow." The Christian virtue we call hope – which, like faith and charity, is one of the graces we receive in our baptism – is like that: it's all about the future.

We wait in joyful hope.

Both of our first two readings, plus the psalm response from Isaiah, call us to rejoice. God is with us. The Lord is near. And something good, something wonderful is coming. The Gospel shows people coming up to John the Baptist – first the crowds, and then tax collectors and soldiers – and asking him what to do. John tells them, in essence, to do the right thing, and then he points to a time of fulfillment. The long-awaited Messiah – the Anointed One, the *Christos*, the savior – is on his way.

We wait in joyful hope.

Many of you, I suspect, have read *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, or at least the first book in the series, called *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. When the first volume begins, Narnia is in the grip of the White Witch. And life in Narnia under the White Witch is described as "always winter and never Christmas." Without the hope of Christmas, there was no joy in Narnia.

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa la la la la, la la la la." What's with this holly? And mistletoe? And evergreen wreaths, and yule logs, and Christmas trees? They all have their roots in paganism, going back to the druids and Viking mythology (and they're all fine, I suppose). But their pagan roots remind us that human beings have been feasting and celebrating in December since long before the time of Jesus and the coming of Christianity. Imagine our most primitive ancestors – I'm talking cave dwellers here. They were astute observers of the cycles of the seasons. Each year they observed that with each passing day the sun seemed to be sinking lower and lower in the southern sky, each day cutting a shorter and shorter swath as it passed from east to west. They were

afraid that one year the sun was going to keep sinking and (who knows?) eventually disappear. But each year, they would observe a day when the sun seemed to stand still. *Solstitium*, from which comes our word solstice – that’s Latin for “the sun standing still.” When they were sure that the sun was on its way back climbing northward, it was time to party. And party they did. The Romans celebrated a holiday called the *festis solis invicti*, the feast of the unconquered sun. And the Church eventually embraced that holiday as a good occasion for celebrating the birth of Jesus. The feast of the unconquered sun (s-u-n) became the feast of the unconquered Son (s-o-n). And the unconquered Son, . . . now *there’s* something to celebrate.

“Fast away the old year passes, fa la la la la, . . .” We are always looking for something new. New Year’s Day is a time for starting over, for turning over a new leaf. We hope for better days, for better things to come. Have you noticed, though, that however high our hopes may be, we are always disappointed? None of the stuff we hope for ever satisfies us. It can’t. Because satisfaction cannot be found in stuff.

Advent points to a God who came to save us from our little hopes and shabby dreams. A God who came as a helpless baby, a baby who was cradled in a feedbox, because he came to feed us. God did not come to satisfy our desires, our appetite for stuff, but to teach us, indeed to show us, that happiness is found in the arms of the God who loves us. The loving arms of God pick us up, with all our fears and anxieties, our hopes and dreams, and those loving arms enfold us with tenderness and mercy. Most of us human beings love our children. Even more, we love our grandchildren, because we tend to worry less about our grandchildren than our children. The Second Person of the Trinity entered into human culture and human history, as a helpless baby, who was loved tenderly by his parents and his grandparents. The tender love of parents and grandparents is a sign, a mere hint, of the love God has for us, of the delight God takes in us.

We wait in joyful hope.

A few years ago our annual parish mission was on the topic of hope. The preacher made a very insightful comment. Hope, he said, is not the same as optimism. Optimism is the attitude that everything is going to turn out okay. The virtue of hope assures us that however it turns out – however it turns out – is going to be okay. We look to the cross and say, “It’s going to be okay.” We look at our lives and our problems, and say, “It’s going to be okay.”

We wait in joyful hope.