

**THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT
ADVENT SPEAKS OF JOY**

TIM J. R. TRUMPER

*"REJOICE! REJOICE!
EMMANUEL SHALL COME TO THEE, O ISRAEL."*

Latin antiphons 12th century

Latin hymn, 1710

Transl. John Mason Neale, 1851

The third, rose-colored, candle lit in Advent is called in Latin the *Gaudete* candle (meaning *rejoice*). It symbolizes the joy of those who, realizing the embodiment of God's love in Jesus, are wooed to return to God.

The promise of joy.

Joy comes through very prominently in the Bible's account of Christ's first coming to earth. Yet, joy was not new to those of faith. Amid his ministry, Jesus made the remarkable claim that Abraham, who lived 2,000 years earlier, "***rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad***" (Jn. 8:56). Jesus does not tell us what exactly Abraham saw, but it was enough to touch his heart. In effect, it put a skip in his step!

Abraham, the father of the nation, was not alone. All conscious of personal sin and its misery yearned to know God's love. Looking forward in faith to Messiah's coming, they found reason for joy and gladness. It kept them through the hardship and tumultuous days of old covenant times: poverty, famine, slavery, alien occupation, and exile. Listen to the prophet Habakkuk (3:17-18):

***Though the fig tree should not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines,
The produce of the oil fail
and the fields yield no food
The flock be cut off from the fold
And there be no heard in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.***

We saw in the first Advent devotional how the Old Testament lays out the main features of the gospel. God met the need of a mediator by revealing more and more of the Messiah who was to come. His one office, we learn, includes the roles of both priest and king.

The Messiah as priest.

Although Abraham was the father of the nation, it was through Moses (Deut. 34:10-12) that so many of the gospel principles were established in Israel. To the great prophet, who lived from *circa* 1,500 B.C. onwards, that God gave the pattern of the tabernacle and the sacrificial system. The one symbolized the presence of God among his people and the way in which we may come before him, the other depicted how the Messiah would function as both the high priest and atoning sacrifice of his people. He would not simply symbolize atonement as did Old Testament priests, he would single-handedly accomplish atonement!

The Messiah as king.

Later, God used the nation's hankering for a king to teach them that the Messiah would also reign. Indeed, he would be the only king to never let them down, always and forever reigning with justice and righteousness (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 72:1). From old covenant times prophecies were declared stating that the kingdom of the Messiah would spread from nation to nation bringing joy to all coming under his merciful reign. This anticipation was turned into prayer for God's saving power to be known among the nations (Ps. 67:2).

The outbursts of joy.

This backdrop explains the paeans of praise that met Messiah's arrival. They began with John the Baptist, the one God called to prepare the people for the Messiah. Filled with the Spirit even prior to his birth (Lk. 1:15), John leapt within the womb of his mother Elizabeth on the visit of the pregnant Mary to his home in the Judean hills. Greeted by Elizabeth, as "***the mother of my Lord,***" Mary responded by breaking forth into her renowned Magnificat. Overawed by the incredible privilege of carrying her Lord to full term, she was full of joy that the one in her womb was "***God [her] Savior.***" Her joy lay not, as the Roman Catholic church teaches, in her own perfection, but in God's forgiveness of her sin through the work of her son, the Messiah (Lk. 1:39-45).



Months later, the one we now know as the Christ was born. The announcement was royal, for it was accompanied by a fanfare. Consistent with the countercultural ways of God, the lowly shepherds in the region of Bethlehem were the first to hear the wonderful news. Writes Luke, **“an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people’”** (Lk. 2:9-11). Suddenly, the joy of heaven broke in on the scene—a multitude of angels praising God. Exchanging their fear for joy, the shepherds responded with the unthinkable: they left their sheep and headed into Bethlehem. There they found in the cattle trough, with Mary and Joseph looking on, the greatest of all shepherds—the Lord of glory, in human flesh, come to bring us into his fold.

The experience of joy.

THE MAGNIFICAT

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit
rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked on the humble estate of
his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations
shall call me blessed;
For he who is mighty has done great things
for me,
And holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
From generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts
of their hearts;
He has brought down the mighty from their
thrones
And exalted those of humble estate;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy,
As he spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his offspring forever.*

LUKE 1:46-55 (ESV)

As sophisticated as we may consider ourselves to be, we can learn much from the simple folk of Jesus’ day. Joy, they teach us, is found not in the denial of personal sin, nor in a reckless involvement in it (as if it has no consequences), but in confession of it to God.

Note the *meaning of confession*. The verb *to confess* (*homologeō*) has the idea of speaking the same word. In confession, then, we come to agreement with God about who he is and about who we are by contrast. In her Magnificat, Mary acknowledges that God is **“the Lord,” “he who is mighty,” “holy,”** strong in arm, and yet merciful. Yet, she also owns her humble estate and her need of a Savior.

Note also the *elements of confession*. Feeling our lowliness, we turn from our sins unto God, trusting in Christ for our forgiveness. Accordingly, there is in confession both repentance unto God and faith in Christ. These two elements are like two strands of a rope. They are distinct but inseparable. We turn to God through Christ with what Professor John Murray (1898–1975) has called a believing repentance and a penitent faith. Suffused through our confession is, in Mary’s words, both an acknowledgement of God’s right to scatter the proud (that’s repentance), and the belief that there is **“mercy . . . for those who fear him.”** Now that is indeed good news of great joy for hearts broken on account of personal sin!

In such a spirit of confession, we enter into Charles Wesley’s Advent hymn, testifying as we sing of our joy in Christ:

*Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art,
Dear Desire of ev’ry nation, joy of ev’ry longing heart.*

A lesser known reformer of the Protestant Reformation, Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig, despite his sufferings, expressed the joy of Advent so beautifully: “Having Christ, I am not sad!” As we, too, await Christ’s return, we lock our eyes on him, for we daily need his help to sustain our purity and our joy (Matt. 28:20; 1 Jn. 3:2-3).



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