

# Light in the Darkness | Advent Three: Joy

Take a long, thoughtful look at the Advent wreath as you approach it on the third Sunday of the season.

The candle of joy appears to be blushing. The deep purples of the candles of hope, peace and love give an added starkness to the pink of the candle of joy.

Approach the candle of joy just right and the contrast is even starker: Beyond the candle of joy stands the Christ candle, pure in its white brilliance, patiently awaiting the touch of flame on Christmas Day.

In the company of purple and white candles, the candle of joy appears to be blushing.

Liturgical purists have an explanation for the odd appearance of a pink candle on the third Sunday of Advent.

“Advent is a season of penitence,” they tell us, “but there is an inherent incompatibility between an attitude of penitence and an expression of joy, so we lighten the candle of joy to rose or pink.”

Well, maybe. The candle of joy still appears to be blushing, even sheepishly so.

For some years, it has seemed that our culture - even those who claim to be religious leaders - has lost the ability to blush.

Not too long ago, wanton displays of crude expressions and cruder actions brought rebuke from religious leaders.

Sadly, of late, certain religious leaders have excused crudeness, even at the expense of those who have been wounded and crippled by words and deeds born

of abuse and malice against people most in need of the good news of hope, joy, peace and love.

Maybe this year will usher in a new era of penitence and we can, again, plumb the depth of joy that includes holy modesty that takes on the appearance of blushing on the face of a people who have been caught in their pride and arrogance.

On the third Sunday of Advent, we hear the final words of the book of the prophet Zephaniah.

Who was he? He was a penitent prophet who challenged Judah to “Rejoice and exult with all your heart” because “the Lord has taken away the judgments against you” (Zephaniah 3:14-15).

In his day, Zephaniah knew that Jerusalem and her inhabitants deserved to take the full brunt of divine judgment.

The bulk of the short book is filled with vitriol aimed at those who failed to live up to the promises of God in their midst.

In the end, however, the prophet sheepishly announces that “God is in your midst” and “will rejoice over you with gladness,” and God will “change [your] shame into praise” (Zephaniah 3:17,19).

Zephaniah blushes. He knows what we should know: that God is the agent of salvation, that God is committed to transforming shame into praise. Zephaniah is sheepish, indeed.

Perhaps Zephaniah was familiar with the first song of Isaiah (12:2-6), which is the psalm for the third Sunday of Advent.

Four generations before Zephaniah, Isaiah of Jerusalem declared, “Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust and not be afraid” (Isaiah 12:2).

Isaiah of Jerusalem knows what we should know: God is the agent of salvation,

that God alone makes it possible for us to “draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3).

If God is the agent of our redemption, we should blush each time we make our confession, “Surely, it is God who saves me.” Isaiah, like Zephaniah, is sheepish, indeed.

On the third Sunday of Advent, we again hear from a prison somewhere in the Roman world.

Paul the Apostle writes to his friends in Philippi to remind them that his importunity is no cause for despair. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).

There is an inherent incompatibility between imprisonment and rejoicing. Well, maybe. “The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5), Paul writes. Even in prison, the Lord is near.

To say so is audacious and impertinent. To believe it is so is to risk the embarrassment of joy in an unlikely circumstance.

The Baptist is still with us. No wonder the candle of joy is blushing.

“You brood of vipers!” he bellows. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Luke 3:7).

Echoing the vitriol of Zephaniah against Jerusalem, John warns, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree ... that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3.9).

So, where is joy? Standing bashfully right there amid hope, peace and love, awaiting Christmas Day when a flame will touch the Christ candle.

The candle of joy blushes as it reminds us that “God is in your midst ... and will rejoice over you with gladness” and God will “change [your] shame into praise”

(Zephaniah 3:17,19).

Joy is first of all God's joy. When it becomes ours, blushing is appropriate.

Light the candle of joy and blush in the presence of God and God's people on the third Sunday of Advent.

It is the prophets, the psalms, the epistles and the Gospel.

*Editor's note: This article is part of a weekly series for Advent 2018, reflecting on the lectionary texts for the Sundays of Advent that are available [here](#). The previous articles in the series are:*

[Light in the Darkness | Advent One: Hope](#)

[Light in the Darkness | Advent Two: Peace](#)