

A little piece of good news: I received a call on Friday asking if we would be open to having Fr. Jacques Philippe visit our parish to give a talk. Fr. Philippe is a priest from France with a new community called the Community of the Beatitudes. He has written nine books, including one on our patron Saint Therese called *The Way of Trust and Love*. It was that little book that began my own journey in getting to know St. Therese and what a great saint she is.

Fr. Philippe will be visiting a few parishes here in the Twin Cities. He will be here on Friday, March 15th for a talk at 7:00 pm. That will be in Lent, so we will have Stations of the Cross, our fish fry that evening, and then a talk by Fr. Philippe. It will be advertised to all the parishes here in the Western Metro. Mark it down on your calendars!

A couple of summers before I was ordained, I spent a summer in Omaha, NE, as a seminarian with a program called the Institute for Priestly Formation. Toward the end of my time there, they encouraged us to be bold in asking God for a special gift in serving Him as a priest. I thought a while about my petition. I remember sitting in this little garden area and it dawned on me, "I want to be a joyful priest. I have met grumpy priests, but I don't want to be a grumpy priest. Lord, give me the gift of joy." I wanted the gift of joy because joy is so attractive. We are made for joy.

Dr. Peter Kreeft, who teaches out at Boston College, says this about joy, "Everyone wants pleasure. More deeply, everyone wants happiness. Most deeply, everyone wants joy."

Today we celebrate *Gaudete* Sunday, or Joy Sunday. Today we get a little breather from the penances we are doing and put an accent on joy. Priests wear rose-colored vestments, the color in between white and purple. Before the sun peeks over the horizon in the morning, one can see beautiful orange and pinkish hues. The sun and its brightness are coming. We are nine days away from Christmas. The rose reminds us that the true Son, Jesus, our daystar, is on His way.

Today, we put a little accent on joy. Joy is dotted throughout the readings – four times in our first reading and twice in our second reading.

I thought we might focus for just a moment on our first reading from Zephaniah. Many of you may have never even heard of the prophet Zephaniah, let alone what this book is all about. It is a short book, only three chapters long. Admittedly, it is not the happiest book. Zephaniah lived about 650 years before the birth of Christ. Unfortunately, things were in pretty rough shape during his lifetime. Leadership around the spiritual center of Israel, the Temple, had become corrupt. Additionally, there was a general moral laxity.

Consequently, in poetic language the Lord sends Zephaniah to call the people back to him. If they choose not to do so, terrible consequences will follow. Unfortunately, the people did not listen. Shortly, after Zephaniah's life, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed their temple, and removed the people the land. It was a terrible tragedy. The book would read like a Shakespearean tragedy if it were not for chapter 3. We hear from this chapter today.

It is a significant change of tone and turn of events. Discouraged and in pain, the people hear, "*Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!*" These are verses of great hope. The people hear that they have not been abandoned. In fact, God is in their midst. He is with them. In fact, we hear a beautiful phrase that the Lord will "*renew you in his love.*" God's love always renews and this gives us hope!

These words are not just for the Israelites 2,600 years ago. God's Word is for all times, all places, and all people. Think of the challenges of our own day.

Personal challenges: For some, there is financial stress. How will I pay my bills? For others, there are health problems – sickness, fighting a disease, or just fatigue from life. For many, there are dysfunctional relationships in families – hurt feelings from words and actions (resentment). For others, there is so much loss – the loss of a loved one. For others, there is anxiety of family gatherings and deadlines at work.

National level: There is frustration with the Church and the way things have been handled or not been handled with those who have been hurt by priests. Additionally, large numbers have abandoned the practice of their faith. And unfortunately, there is growing hostility toward those who practice their faith. Politically, things are a just mess with civil discourse almost becoming extinct. Finally, we continue to experience terrible disasters such terrorist attacks and natural disasters (fires and floods).

Indeed, we have our share of problems! Hence, God's word that He is in our midst, that He is renewing us in His love are very much welcomed! St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said, "Don't curse the darkness, light a candle." So many things are out of your control. You can't control what happens in the Vatican or in Washington, but you can choose to do good in your home, your neighborhood, your work, or here at the parish. You can choose to be a person of hope, a person of joy, a much-needed candle.

And, here is something worth pondering. It is easy to blow out one, two, or three candles on a birthday cake, but nearly impossible to blow out 100. Look around you. There are over 900 (pushing a 1,000) people that walk through our doors every weekend at Mass (1,000 candles). You can't blow out a 1,000 candles. Together, we maintain our joy. Together, we remain a people of hope. Together we sing. Why? God is in our midst! He has not abandoned you or the world, but rather renewing you in His love. And He sings joyfully because of you: your faith, your joy, your hope. Do not curse the darkness. Be a candle! And together, we can be a people of joy singing that God is good and always renewing the world in His love.