

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:4-7)

This is the season of Joy. It is a time where it is said... joy has come. It is a time when we sing joy to the world. And today... we light the candle of joy.

The candle is the odd man out glowing, the only pink candle amongst three purple. If you know nothing of church tradition... it doesn't take too much to know that today is special.

Today is special because of joy. The candle is pink... not for aesthetics —Not because the males among us need to demonstrate just how secure we are in our masculinity...because of joy. No, that third candle is pink (or technically rose-colored) because it's Gaudete Sunday. Huh?

And to give you the briefest of history lessons... the color goes back to a single pink rose during the season of lent. During the lenten season that was traditionally marked with fasting, the early church singled out a single Sunday to feast and celebrate the coming joy.

On this day, the pope would give out a single pink rose to honor an outstanding citizen. Clergy even began to wear pink vestments and decorate the church in pink to mark the day. Well... we have lost the seven candles of lent... but gained the four candles of advent. And amidst the four candles you still see a single pink candle... the candle of joy.

Now you still may be asking where does the whole Gaudete Sunday thing come from... the Third Sunday in Advent is referred to as Gaudete Sunday because the introit for the mass begins “Gaudete in Domino

semper: iterum dico, gaudete” meaning “Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say rejoice.”

But now, I ask you... what is joy?

This could really be a hard question to answer. I mean... there can be so many different things that bring us joy.

Joy for me is probably not the same thing as joy for you. The TV has recently been offering hundreds of different shopping ideas, each one guaranteed to bring joy.

Get a new car wrapped in a big red bow, get that diamond necklace and earring set, or get that shiny new play station three! But then there is the joy of family... the joy of a job well done. And I could go on and on.

I guess if we are going to get anywhere... I must ask... why on earth is that candle pink.

Now we know the historical reason... but what is the theological reason behind the pink color.

It is not pink for the sake of cars, or jewelry, or electronics, nor is it pink for family or job satisfaction. So... why is it pink? Is there such a thing as “church joy?”

Looking through some of my story collections I was able to find one illustration that dealt with “church joy” and I would like to share it with you now.

A small boy in the pew in front of you suddenly turns around and smiles a huge grin. He looks from person to person, smile stretching all the way back to those in the back pew. He isn't gurgling, spitting, humming, tearing apart the hymnbooks, or rummaging through his mother's purse. He is just smiling. Suddenly, his mother jerks him around, and with a stage whisper that everyone can hear, she says, “Stop grinning. You're

in church.” With that she gives him a slap on his backside, and as the tears roll down his cheeks she adds, “That’s better.”

While humorous... I fear the honesty behind this story.

Church is not always thought of as a place where we can smile. This is often where people come when the going gets the toughest. And this is doubly true during times of deep trouble!

This is where you will find doors open and candles being lit in the wake of national crisis. This is where people often bring their biggest and heaviest burdens to lay down at the foot of the cross.

And you can practically see the weight on their shoulders. How could we even possibly think of grinning when the person next to us is in the verge of tears.

On any given Sunday, we could have a “Chippie” visiting us in the greatest distress, needing comfort and guidance... wracking their brains in prayer.

Oh... what is a “Chippie.” Let me introduce you to a small parakeet by the name of Chippie.

It all began when Chippie’s owner decided to clean out his cage with a vacuum. She stuck the nozzle into the cage to clean up the bottom of the cage. Suddenly the phone rang.

She reached for the phone with her free hand and not realizing it... her hand holding the nozzle rose slowly upward and sucked Chippie into the vacuum cleaner. Realizing what she had done, she dropped the phone and turned off the vacuum.

With her heart in her mouth, she opened the vacuum bag to rescue poor Chippie. Chippie was stunned and covered head to foot with gray dust... but thankfully he was still alive.

She grabbed him and rushed him to the bathtub, turned on the cold water full blast and held him under the water giving him a power washing.

Then it dawned on her that Chippie was soaking wet and shivering, so she did what any compassionate pet-owner would do. She snatched up the blow dryer and blasted him with hot air.

You may be wondering if Chippie survived all this. Yes... yes he did, but he didn't sing for a long time after that.

Even now, he mostly just sits there in his cage eyeing the closest where the vacuum cleaner is kept.

Being sucked up, washed out, and blown over had stolen the joy from his heart.

Brothers and sisters... can you blame him... one could easily understand why Chippie doesn't have much joy.

And this is where several people are. They are lost, troubled, sad, fearful, devastated... anything but joyful. And they come here seeking answers. It is time we seek those answers too... it has been a while since our text was read... let us go back for a refresher.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:4-7)

Paul... was a “chippie.” When he wrote these words, he had been stripped of everything, locked in a cold, dark, and wet prison cell, and had even been sentenced to die. And he sits down to write his friends in Philippi... “Yep... I'm in prison... again... and this time sentenced to die... and oh... by the way... rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again rejoice!” I don't get it. I just don't get it. Paul is definitely having a

chippie moment. And he responds by writing this letter. A letter that... while it is only four chapters long... manages to mention joy ten times! TEN TIMES! Paul is having the epitome of a Chippie moment and he mentions joy TEN TIMES.

How can he say that? Has Paul has lost it a bit here. I mean... wouldn't it be just plain dumb to go up to somebody who is having a Chippie moment and say "Rejoice in the Lord always."

How on earth can he write about joy. He doesn't have anything to be joyful about. His life is on the line, he is cold, wet, and tired, he has no freedom, has no shiny car with a bright red ribbon waiting for him in the driveway.... no limited time diamond earring and necklace sale to take advantage of... no play station 5 to occupy his time.

He is separated from family and friends, and cannot take a single bit of joy from a job well done because... well being in prison had put a small damper on his traveling ministry.

Yet over and over again in his letter to the Philippians, Paul brings up joy.

Somehow he got it into his head, that you don't need all that stuff to have joy.

Even his earthly life being in jeopardy could not part him from joy.

You see... looking deeper into the book of Philipians... we begin to see a pattern.

For Paul... joy does not come from the world... it comes from God.

Our God is the giver of true joy. Our God is the great comforter. Our God is the giver of a peace that transcends all understanding. And it doesn't come from something you can buy... it comes from something freely given.

You see, Paul's greatest joy was his assurance from God. He knew that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is through Christ Jesus our Lord. We too have this great joy.

This is the biblical concept of joy. It goes far beyond momentary happiness. Like the happiness a child might experience when they unwrap a gift that they'd hoped for on Christmas day.

It is an extreme happiness that cannot be deterred by present circumstances. This type of joy comes from God alone. Joy can often be experienced when a Christian thinks about salvation, eternal life, or Jesus.

It is an eager anticipation about wonderful things to come. The shepherds experienced this as they ran to Bethlehem to see Jesus.

what do the Scripture says about joy:

- God fills us with joy (Romans 15:13). We cannot will ourselves to experience joy. It comes from God alone.
- It's a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). We experience more joy when we spend time with God. We have to keep in mind that joy only comes from God, but when we spend more time with him, we allow him to fill us with it.
- No one can take joy from us (John 16:22). Given to us by God himself, no one has the ability to rob us of our joy. No matter what circumstances we encounter, no one can take this away.
- Joy rests in things from God such as salvation and righteousness (Psalm 51:12).

Depending on the translation, joy appears more than 100 times in the Bible.

While we wait for Christ to come again, we don't have to despair. God has given us a joy that no one can take away. No matter what happens in this dark world, we can experience light. We experience difficulties differently than the world. We have light even in the darkest moments. Joy is essential to the Christian experience. We cannot get far without it, and we need it as we, like the shepherds, anticipate the coming of our Savior.

The candle there is not pink for any earthly reason... it is pink for a dear and heavenly reason. It is the great joy of the coming of Christ the Lord. As we journey closer and closer to Bethlehem... we are reminded of what awaits us when we get there. A savior, who brings us something that no one else can give... true joy. That is why Paul can write "Rejoice in the Lord always" because of what he writes in verse 5: "The Lord is at hand."

That is why Paul can write "again I will say it, REJOICE" because of what he writes in verse 7, "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Yes... brothers and sisters, the church can be a place of smiling... because of what the Christmas season is REALLY about. True joy cannot be packaged and wrapped and put under a tree. It can only be found in a manger. And it awaits there for you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...
Amen.