

The Third Sunday of Advent, Cycle B
Isaiah 61:1-2A, 10-11
Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28
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This, the Third Sunday of Advent, is Gaudete Sunday. “Gaudete” means, “rejoice.” Gaudete Sunday dates back to the time when Advent was regarded as a kind of second Lent – a penitential season of fasting in preparation for Christmas. The idea was to give Christians a break in their regimen of penance, by reminding them of the joy that awaited them in the coming of Christ. Our readings convey a powerful sense that God’s saving plan for each of us will, inevitably, be accomplished. Isaiah exults that the Lord has clothed him “in a robe of salvation,” and that “As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up, so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before all the nations.” So that however dark things may appear at the moment, in the end all will be right as rain. We find the same confidence in Christ’s victory in our Second Reading. Paul prays that his Thessalonians will be “preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, assuring them that, “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.”

But if our ultimate salvation is safely in the hands of Christ, how ought we behave in the mean time? Here again, Paul offers useful instruction: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks... Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil.” In this connection one thinks of St. Augustine’s advice to

“Pray as if everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.” I’m reminded of the early Harry Potter novels, in which the young heroes are tested to the limits of their virtue and ingenuity, yet there is always the sense that old Albus Dumbledore, their headmaster, is somewhere in the background, ensuring that things will work out for the best. Perhaps, in this sense, Christ is our headmaster.

Or think of the scene in J. M. Barrie’s play, *Peter Pan*, in which Tinker Bell has been poisoned and is dying. She will recover only if children believe in fairies. The children in the audience applaud frantically to show they believe, and Tinker Bell is saved. Now, of course the script of the play had already been written. Tinker Bell was going to survive even if the children sat on their hands. But Barrie apparently thought it would be good for the children to be drawn into the story. Making them agents of Tinker Bell’s recovery would foster their empathy and compassion. It would help make them better people. Maybe all our struggles in life are the equivalent of our applauding madly to show we have hope and faith in Christ. Okay, I know that analogy limps badly in all sorts of ways, so I’ll attempt one more.

The story is told of a wise rabbi who was renowned for his brilliant mind. When the rabbi died, his widow sold his possessions. The rabbi’s students came to the sale, hoping to acquire some keepsake to remind them of their master. One student picked up the rabbi’s favorite pipe and puffed on it. Immediately his mind was filled with astonishing insights and extraordinary wisdom. The student quickly sold all of his few possessions and bought the pipe. He took the pipe back to his room and puffed on it again. This time absolutely nothing happened – no great thoughts, no wisdom. Feeling cheated, the student took the pipe to the late rabbi’s

successor and described the situation. The rabbi explained to the student what had happened: “The first time you puffed on the pipe it belonged to your master, so you thought your master’s thoughts. Now the pipe belongs to you, so when you puff on it you think your own thoughts.” We are the pipe. What ultimately matters is to whom we belong. As long as we are Christ’s, God’s saving plan will be accomplished through us. We could have no better reason to act with fervor in the world. And on this Gaudete Sunday, no better reason to rejoice.