

In the past couple of years, a major electronics chain store has mounted an advertising campaign, where people approach a store clerk and ask for the location of an item on the shelves, describing it with ‘exclamations’ or ‘reactions’ of the people who will open it...maybe you’re familiar with it. The dialogue is something like, “Excuse me, can you tell me where I can find the ‘I can’t believe you got me THIS! THIS is the BEST Christmas present EVER!!!””

The commercial message, while entertaining, is quite clear...the happiness of the one receiving the gift is contingent or dependent on that particular gift. And while it is very entertaining and funny in its portrayal, we have to be somewhat careful here; careful that we don’t slip into believing this message in our own hearts, that somehow happiness – our or another’s” depends on *something* or *someone*; on temporary circumstances, opportunities, privileges or even power. We ‘buy into’ the big yet subtle lie, that happiness comes from temporary things; but even our rational minds tell us temporary things can only bring temporary happiness, and then we need to endlessly search for more, and better and bigger things to bring us temporary happiness. Our souls instinctively know that the only way we can receive permanent, lasting happiness, is through the One who is permanent and lasting – and the only One who is permanent and lasting, is God.

There is a fundamental difference really between happiness and joy. Happiness in a sense, is an interior state of being –or a feeling within ourselves. We can even choose to be happy or unhappy, depending on our circumstances.

Joy on the other hand is something that we express, because to contain Joy within ourselves is impossible; it’s the same root for the word ‘Rejoice’; and ‘Rejoicing’ is not something we do in an interior way, and never show – by its nature, rejoicing is something that must be exterior – that we show, that we express, that we share.

And one of the most important points for us as Catholics to remember, is that Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. (Any of our young people confirmed this year should be quick to point that out.) Joy is not something that the Holy Spirit places within us, like one of His Gifts...Joy is a fruit of the Spirit’s actions, it’s how we express the gifts that He has touched us with; it is how our souls react to the ‘nearness of God’. We were created to be with God, to be near God, and that is why Joy is the resulting response when we receive that grace of sensing God’s presence. We can experience this ‘nearness of God’ every day, and most frequently in the places or circumstances we least expect it. In fact, most often, we experience this ‘nearness’ in the midst of ‘nothing’ – in the poor, in the lowly, in our encounters with the marginalized, the hurting, those in need...this is certainly not where our culture tells us to find happiness or joy. In fact our culture tells us quite the opposite; but God is always there – always near, and it is when we become aware of that ‘nearness’ that we experience a deep Joy.

The prophet Micah in his book which we heard in our first reading, talks of Bethlehem, a little village, by no means being the least of the tribes or towns of Judah –because the Messiah , “one who is to lead my people Israel’ was to come from that little town that was so insignificant in the eyes of the region or the rest of the world...a most unexpected place...but for those who recognized Jesus in this prophecy, there was a sense of Joy.

What more beautiful season can we have to represent this truth of reacting to the ‘nearness of God’, this Joy, than Advent? Especially at this point, the 4th or last Sunday of Advent, as we prepare for the great celebration of God coming among us as one of us, the wonderful feast of Christmas?

And what more beautiful example of this response of Joy could we receive than in this week’s Gospel passage from St. Luke? A regular ‘theme’ that runs through the entire gospel of Luke is one of great joy, of rejoicing as the ideal and appropriate response to the work of God being done in Jesus...in the encounter with God in Jesus.

This passage comes after Mary, having received God’s message from the angel Gabriel, is ‘overshadowed by the power of the Most High’ and through the power of the Holy Spirit she is now pregnant. This is a crucial stage in a woman’s pregnancy, the first three months, or trimester – we often have the urge to advise caution – to be careful – during this delicate stage; but Mary doesn’t simply stop and contemplate this child of wonder growing in her womb, developing within her.

She goes out, the Gospel says, in haste - another sign of Joy of the Holy Spirit - to share this great news and to witness another of God’s works - traveling from Galilee to a Judean town; a journey of about 100 miles, probably on foot - to her kinswoman Elizabeth - based on the angel’s message – to minister to Elizabeth; helping her out during her own time of pregnancy.

And it is here that we encounter yet more JOY

Luke: 1:41-45; the child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy

This child of Elizabeth’s – St. John the Baptist - would become the herald, the forerunner of Christ, preparing His way. He was commissioned in JOY.

Despite any trials that would lie ahead, (and we know there would be many), this initial meeting, commissioning, encounter with Jesus as He humanly grows in Mary, brings great Joy...this nearness of the Lord brings JOY to all those Mary carries Christ to.

This Joy is not only contained to the Baptist – it spreads immediately to his mother:

The Gospel continues: Elizabeth ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ asks, ‘how is it that the ‘Mother of my Lord’ comes to me?’

That word, “Lord” with a capital ‘L’ is translated from the Hebrew word ‘Adonai’ meaning ‘God’...this declaration which St. Luke writes in his Gospel account of this meeting is recorded some 400 years before the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) would formally declare the Blessed Virgin, ‘Mary the Mother of God’; and yet the Joy that Elizabeth feels, spills over and out, making a declaration, not just about Mary, but about who Jesus *is* even as He is in the first stages of life in the womb: He is the Lord: He is God. This declaration is that outward sign of Joy, that Rejoicing, that couldn’t have come from some searching for temporary happiness – it was

that response , that fruit of the movement of the Holy Spirit; that reaction to the awareness of the nearness of God.

Elizabeth, it says, exclaims with a loud cry ‘blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’ –not a typical greeting at all, especially from an elder kinswoman to her younger relative; but again, this overflowing of joy is not something that makes sense to the secular, rational world; but it makes perfect sense to the spiritual and sacred. And because it makes so much sense in the sacred, we repeat this greeting and prayer each time we pray the ‘Hail Mary’.

Is it any wonder that we turn to Mary to help us come closer to Her Son. That nearness to her Son is what she desires us to experience and the JOY that only He can give us?

So as Christmas draws even closer, and we prepare our hearts to receive Jesus, as Mary did, we need to reflect on our own experience of the nearness of Jesus, and maybe ask ourselves a couple of questions: Do I carry Jesus with me to others? Do I find Him in unexpected places?

Especially in this season of Advent, I am feeling compelled to share the Joy of Christ with those around me? Joy in the nearness of Our Lord, wherever we happen to meet Him?

Joy comes from that encounter with God – the nearness of God – our souls instinctively feel this nearness and are touched by the Holy Spirit’s grace of JOY – when we feel this JOY we are likewise instinctively compelled to share this JOY....we might even be compelled to raise up a prayer to God and say out loud ,”Thank you for the gift of Your Son – this is the best present EVER!!”