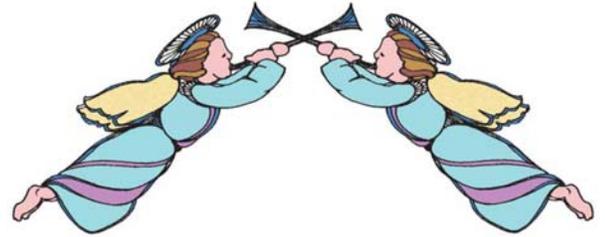


From the Pastor's Desk

**"Rejoice in the Lord always.
I shall say it again: rejoice!"**



Firstly, I remind you of and encourage you to attend one of the two Advent **Penance Services** this week, Tuesday or Wednesday; each will have a short liturgy (under 15 minutes) of prayer, Gospel and reflection, followed by time for individual confessions.

Tues., Dec 18, 4:00 PM at St. Stephen

Wed., Dec 19, 6:30 PM at St. Francis

Individual confessions, two priests available, will be offered for at least one hour after the conclusion of the Penance Service. All welcome to either service.

Gaudete Sunday. In Latin, like Spanish, the pronouns are added to the ends of verbs, like a suffix, especially in the imperative (command) tense. The "te" final letters of "gaudete" is the pronoun for "you." Thus, the Church orders, "You, rejoice!" Or, "rejoice, you!" In English we simply say "Rejoice!" The pronoun is implied.

Why does the Church wish us to rejoice on this Sunday? Because the celebration of the Lord's birth is twice as close as when we began Advent. In reality, this year it is even much closer than two weeks, because Christmas falls on a Tuesday. That means that the Fourth Week of Advent is only two days long! Christmas is only nine days away. We have to throw our spiritual preparation into full gear. There is no time to dilly-dally.

Look how much energy we can put into preparing for Christmas on a physical level — decorating, buying gifts, sending cards, baking cookies, etc. Retailers have been urging us to shop for Christmas gifts for weeks now. Let's not ignore the spiritual level and the personal relationship level with Christ, our Savior.

John the Baptist challenges his listeners to a dramatic change of heart, "Repent!" Folks are making their way out into the desert to hear him. Others have told them of the Baptist's message; they are eager to hear

it for themselves. They want guidance, "*What should we do?*" they ask him. John gives them very practical advice: he tells them to share their food and clothing, to act honorably, to be honest. John's response to being asked that question three times by different social groups, anticipates Jesus' own words: "I was hungry and you gave me food. . . naked and you clothed me." Notice how Jesus takes it a step farther. It is not some random recipient of our kindness and generosity, but it is Jesus, himself, that we help. Jesus raises the stakes, but it was John the Baptist who laid the groundwork. It is he who told them how to live even before Jesus began his mission. In truth, John the Baptist told the people to **act like Jesus**, even before they had even heard of him.

Calling people to act like Christ, John uses the image of the wheat and the chaff, a very sobering message. Speaking of one who is to come, John says, "*His winnowing fan is in his hand.*" A winnowing fan was used to blow away the chaff so that the wheat could be saved. The wheat will be gathered into barns, "*but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.*" It is the wheat that is valuable. It is the wheat that nourishes the people; the chaff has no value. The wheat can be ground into flour, planted and grown, shared with others. The chaff cannot be eaten, or grown, and offers nothing to be shared. Once removed from the grain the chaff has no value whatever; it is useless. John, whom Jesus praises as the "*greatest to be born of women,*" sounds very much like Jesus himself. He calls us to nourish, to plant, to grow, and to share. He calls us to be "wheat" for the world!

Zephaniah, Isaiah (Responsorial Psalm) and Paul each begin with exultation; "*Shout for joy.*" "*Cry out with joy.*" "*Rejoice in the Lord always.*" Thus, rightly, this Sunday is called "Gaudete Sunday." The reason for such joy, "**God is in your midst!**"

Wishing you a holy Advent, Fr. Bob

ADVENT RECONCILIATION SCHEDULE

The Sacrament of Reconciliation... *a shower for your soul!* Fr. Bob & Fr. Jim Hanson will celebrate two **Penance Liturgy Services** to give you the opportunity to go to confession before Christmas. In addition to the services mentioned above, Fr. Bob is always available for confessions on Saturdays (3:10-3:40 PM at St. Stephen and 5:35-6:00 PM at St. Francis). Or call either parish to make an appointment (636-629-1717 or 573-678-2207).