**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

Welcome to the third Sunday of Advent. Next Sunday is a double-header! It will be the fourth and final Sunday of Advent as well as Christmas Eve. It’s going to be a whole lot of wonderful rolled up into one little day.

Some time back, I joined a group of my family members for dinner at a restaurant. Our youngest was a little girl, probably about a year-and-a-half old. She was being carried in her daddy’s arms. We were seated at a far table in one of the smaller rooms of the restaurant – the first to arrive for the evening. Just as soon as we sat down, in came another family. They were seated at the other end of the room. They likewise had a toddler, about the same age as ours, being held in his daddy’s arms.

When those two youngsters saw each other, there was a small explosion! Simultaneously each child shot out an arm in the direction of the other and squealed. It was a gesture of pure joy. It was total abandonment to the moment; unexpected; and initially embarrassing for us adults. Once we realized the innocent joy in this tiny outburst, we all laughed: those in my family and those in the little boy’s family, too.

What was happening in that moment? Neither of those kids would have responded that way to an adult, except Santa Claus, of course. They were reacting to each other. It was a sublime moment of recognition: not just recognition of the other as being similar to; but of self-recognition. They saw themselves in each other. Then they reached out to what they saw. Like attracts like. We tend to say that opposites attract, but at the very least, *like mirrors like*.

That may be one of the biggest blessings of Advent. It is a *mirror*. It reflects back to us who we really are. What the season brings to us and our entire culture – joy; hope; peace – finds its counterpart in us. Because joy, hope and peace do have a counterpart in us: they come factory-installed. We may not always feel that way: not joyful, low on hope; unable to see peace in our world or even in our lives. But when Advent walks into the room we can squeal with recognition.

The joy of Advent reaches out to us. If we’re alert and paying attention, we can respond by reaching back. Our response might take on the quality of a “religious experience” in the sense of being totally abandoned to the moment. We may even feel a little embarrassed, like adults in a restaurant who don’t know what their children will do next. Our response might even take on the quality of a revelation: as if a thin veil covering everything is suddenly lifted before you. Advent can let you see things in a way you never have before.

That is because Advent is when we realize that Something beyond us is becoming part of our everyday lives. Something beyond our imagining; something wonderful and trustworthy. That “something beyond” is Divine Life. Divine Life comes in human form because *like mirrors like*.

In the Christ, we see ourselves. We can look at him and see something of our own reflection. That’s made infinitely easier because he was born of Mary and dwelled among us, so we’re not looking at some abstraction of religion, like a set of rituals, or even a sacred text. In Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, we can see something of who we really are, and who we are meant to be. And he sees himself in us. Put another way, God sees something of God’s own self in us. God looks at us and sees a reflection of God’s own self. How is that even possible? Because we’re made in the image and likeness of God. Because there is captured within each of our souls some measure of Divine spark regardless of who we are; regardless of anything we’ve done. And, because all things exist in and through God, all things ultimately mirror God and reflect God and reveal God.

This is an amazingly lofty thought! That the Divine Life sees itself in us and we can see ourselves in Divine Life. *Like mirrors like*. There is a mutuality here not just of recognition, but of longing, like those two little kids in the restaurant longing to touch one another.

No wonder our second reading says “rejoice always.” This is non-situational rejoicing. This is your car with its engine on even when you’re not moving forward in traffic. “Rejoice always” just keeps running in the background of our souls. We don’t rejoice because we lost weight, got a promotion, and have no cavities. We rejoice because we long for God and God responds. Obviously we don’t rejoice because we gained weight, got fired, and need oral surgery. We rejoice in spite of those bad tidings because God longs for us.

Our second reading also says to “pray without ceasing.” This has bewildered the Church for millennia because: How do you do this? The closest we’ve come as an institution is the monastic hours or offices which summon those in religious orders to pray nine times a day, or seven, or three or two.

Let me suggest a different approach. What is it we do without ceasing? Most of our bodily functions cycle on and off as needed but not our breath. Our hearts always beat; blood always flows; lungs billow and contract. All of this is ruled by our breath. Stop breathing long enough and they all stop.

Pray without ceasing is like breathing. Prayer becomes as close as our own breath and about as automatic. Christian author and teacher James Finley talks about an experience he once had where with every inhale he felt God saying, “I love you,” and with every exhale James said back to God, “I love you.” This was a mystical experience he had that lasted a few days. But what a wonderful way to pray even when we’re not having a mystical experience.

This kind of openness to the Divine Life is praying without ceasing. It is what will allow us to respond spontaneously when Advent reaches out to us with joy; hope; peace as well as with its unbounded anticipation. If we’re alert we can also reach out and even connect! Connecting might look like total abandonment to the moment as you walk past the bell ringer outside City Market. It might be innocent joy at the sight of people wearing Santa Claus hats. It could take on the quality of revelation: as if a thin, dirty veil covering everything is suddenly lifted and you see things in a way you never have before. Amen.