

[Spirituality](#)



The steeple of St. Mary Catholic Church in Menasha, Wisconsin, is seen below a shining Mars Sept. 6. NASA reports the planet is at its brightest since 2003. (CNS/Brad Birkholz)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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These lessons today are in a particular way very timely for us here in the United States, the Catholic Church in this country, perhaps the church in other parts of the world. As I mentioned in introducing the first lesson, the chosen people had suffered terrible consequences because of their failed leadership. They were misguided by that leadership and finally went to war and were defeated and exiled. For decades they suffered.

Third Sunday of Advent

[December 16, 2018](#)

Zepaniah 3:14-18A

Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6

Philippians 4:4-7

Luke 3:10-18

But then as we heard in that first lesson today, in the midst of all of that, God sent a prophet to them who proclaimed it was a time to rejoice. "Rejoice!" the prophet says, "The Lord is near!" If you read carefully and listen carefully, you discover why Zephaniah can cry out that the Lord is near and they should rejoice. "On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not be afraid nor let your hands tremble. God, your God, is in your midst.' " God is in your midst even in the worse of situations.

Commentators say that the word that Zephaniah uses there actually means womb, or at least the root is "womb." So God is within us in a very intimate way. And in spite of what's happening around us, and in our lives even, in our world, God is in our midst. God is within us, and we can experience great joy if we reflect on that and touch deeply within ourselves to discover God within us. Paul, obviously, had learned that lesson when you hear his message from his prison, a desperate situation for him waiting to be executed.

The physical surroundings of that prison were incredibly harsh. Yet Paul could say, "Rejoice! Again, I say, rejoice! The Lord is near." Paul is thinking not only of the Lord being within us, but also of the return of Jesus. At the time he was writing, the early church still was convinced that Jesus was to return very shortly. So Paul says anticipating that, "Rejoice, always rejoice." In our own struggles, our daily struggles, the difficulties of our world, within our church, within our nation, we too can find joy if we try to be in touch with the God who is within us.

And that, as we hear in the Gospel lesson, that requires us probably to change in some ways. John suggests to the people there to be mindful of our material gifts. It's a constant theme in Luke's Gospel of the problem of wealth, how it can take hold of us, distract us from the really most important things. We can become greedy and want more and more. We live in a culture that keeps telling us that we need this; we need more. In fact, great numbers among us are desperately poor, within our own country and even worse, in other parts of the world.

So John is saying share what you have, find a way to rejoice in the gifts that God gives you, but to remember that they are gifts. Everything we have is a gift from God, even our very existence. God has loved us into existence and God continues to support us with God's love. So we must learn to share what we have more than we have before, perhaps. Because I'm sure all of us have shared, but we have to keep on finding the ways to reach out to those who are especially desperately poor.

John also tells the soldiers a first step toward giving up war and violence would be to show respect for other people, to not bully people as the military at that time tended to do. They treated people with contempt. John was telling them don't do that. Then also the tax collectors — a group of people in the time of Jesus who were despised by the rest of the people because they worked for the Roman Empire — they were working on behalf of the emperor, taking the people's goods and money and even more than they were obligated to pay.

John says to the tax collectors not to defraud the people, take only what you have a right to take. Those are all good things that we need to try to do. But I think we can be inspired even more if we look at the example of Jesus, not just the words of John. Jesus became known as a friend of the tax collectors. He had dinner with them, much to the distress of the religious leaders who were failing to guide the people well. Jesus was known as friend of the tax collectors.

Do you remember, Matthew, one of the apostles — Jesus met him as he was collecting taxes and invited him to follow and Matthew did. So Jesus went even beyond what John says. Jesus reached out and drew people, people like tax collectors to be his friends. In every way Jesus exceeded the call that John gave, like to the military, not just don't bully, but give up violence. Always return love for hate, non-violence for violence. Jesus takes this way beyond.

So, as we try to discover God within our midst, in our hearts, in the depths of our being, we will do it if we begin to follow more closely the way John has directed us and the way Jesus teaches us, not just by his words but by his example. If we do this, even begin to start in a small way today and throughout this week as we come closer to Christmas, we will find ourselves more able to celebrate that great feast with great joy because we will have discovered God in our midst and the depth of our being and with that we will experience joy. So I can repeat to you what Paul says, "Rejoice! Again I say it, rejoice in the Lord!"

Editor's note: *This homily was given Dec. 16 at St. Ambrose Parish, Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*

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