

- I stand before you dressed in pink, looking like a bad Infant of Prague Statue on a good day
  - I stand before you like this to make a point, my dear friends, my sisters and brothers in Christ: As disciples of Jesus we must REJOICE. We must be joyful, indeed FULL OF JOY.
  - Gaudete is the Latin word for Rejoice! We interrupt our regular Advent waiting and expectation to remind us to prepare differently, to wait differently, to expect differently, TO BE DIFFERENT!
  - And our readings today make clear why all of this is so urgent.
- Remember what the prophet Isaiah said in our first reading
  - *The desert and the parched land will exult;  
the steppe will rejoice and bloom...with abundant flowers,  
and rejoice with joyful song...the splendor of our God...  
the eyes of the blind [will] be opened, the ears of the deaf...cleared;  
...the lame leap like a stag,...the tongue of the mute will sing.*
  - Look at that transformation:
    - Desert not only fertile, but beautiful with flower, showing God's glory in a way even our landscape committee would envy; flowers so plentiful, beautiful they will seem to sing.
    - And that's not all: the blind will see, the deaf, hear, the lame and the mute will be healed, transformed to such an extent that they will not only walk but leap like a stag, not only speak but sing (hopefully better than I do)
  - But these are merely symptoms of an underlying condition. And Isaiah makes perfectly clear what that condition is: ***Here is your God.*** God's presence is what leads to the total transformation of nature and then takes us even further:
    - The presence of God allows hope, calms fears, strengthens hands, stills knocking knees.
    - Isaiah points out that God will seek out the lost, free the trapped, and save all people.

- What was for Isaiah only a hopeful prophecy written in the future tense, becomes reality in Jesus Christ:
  - *Jesus said to them in reply,  
“Go and tell John what you hear and see:  
the blind regain their sight, the lame walk,  
lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,  
the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.  
And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”*
  - The message that will go back to John the Baptist, now suffering in prison, now wondering whether he has wasted his life, and that message will make perfectly clear that Jesus is the fulfillment promised through Isaiah and the other prophets, AND also that God will go much further than promised.
- THIS is the cause for our joy. What God has promised, God is accomplishing. God is present and active.
  - God **IS** present, and most surely not only in the passive beauty of nature, but actively and alive, **here** and **now**, seeking out right now those who are lost, freeing right now those trapped, and saving right now all people, even from our own sinfulness.
  - THIS is why we should rejoice.
  - Note well, that JOY is not happiness or mere contentment. Joy is not about emotion nor about everything being fine. Joy does ignore the challenges and difficulties in my life. Joy is precisely about knowing I am not alone in those challenges.
  - **Here is your God**, quiet but active and present, the cause of our JOY.
  - I must admit, though, I never really took hold of all this, never really personalized it or internalized it. Sure that’s great for John the Baptist and the saints but doesn’t really have much to do with me. I can talk a good game but the reality of life, especially MY life is far different.

- The discrepancy hit me again recently when I heard the gospel at daily Mass last Friday. In the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus encounters two blind men. Following Jesus, they cry out for healing.
  - Before Jesus heals them, though, he pauses to ask: “Do you believe I can do this?” “YES,” they respond. Then, without hesitation, without difficulty, without even blinking an eye, Jesus heals them.
  - Why would he ask that? The question of Jesus was invitation for those two blind men to have faith in Jesus, to put their trust in him.
  - You see, (the pun is very much intended) I was and remain sure that Jesus worked these miraculous healings and did all kinds of others great works. And I am sure that God continues to work miracles of healing, both physical and otherwise in the world around me. And I believe that God will make everything right at the Eschaton.
- But I realized by my words, and thoughts and actions, I have not answered this question of Jesus in the same way as those two blind men about what needed healing in my life, about my own blindness. I did not believe Jesus would do what needed to be done to heal me. I knew he COULD do it but I just don’t trust Him enough to believe that He WILL do it.
- And with me, it’s a pattern. So while I am asking God:
  - to make me a better pastor
  - for a deeper prayer life and more lively relationship with Jesus;
  - for an increased gentleness to lead others to Christ;
  - for discernment of how I should spend any given moment of the day, and, also, for a few more of those moments;
  - for the unity of our pastorate and an awareness of just how that might come to be;
  - for reconciliation for those struggling in their marriage or with their kids or their parents or their in-laws or with their pastor;

- for a greater awareness of our responsibility to respect each other, even when we think differently, to look after one another, most especially those in need;
- for reconciliation in our nation and peace in our world, harmony among all peoples, races, and nations; for an end to all division, bitterness, prejudice and persecution;
- for help in preaching the truth about justice and doctrine and morality while still being gentle and pastoral;
- All of time I was asking for God for help with all of this, **I didn't really believe God would do it.**
- Even worse, I thought **I** had to do it. Talk about your Savior complex or a martyr's complex. I was in the process of making sure Jansenism, the belief that I have to EARN my way to heaven, existed well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
  
- And, in the quiet recesses of my heart, I was really thinking:
  - Not me Lord, I can't be joyful. I'm struggling with fear and difficulty to lead the people You've given to me.
  - Not me Lord. There are days when I am so distracted that I can't even pray and other times when what little prayer I eek out seems nothing but a waste of time
  - Not me Lord, I can't be joyful. I have too much to do and I can't balance the schedule.
  - Not me Lord. I don't know what to say, Lord, to the young person struggling with sexuality, the husband fighting for his marriage or the mom struggling to hold her family together.
  - Not me Lord. I have no idea how to bring our nation together, to help people put bitterness and anger behind them.
  - Not me Lord. If I speak the truth I'll alienate some and make others mad. If I don't speak the truth I stand condemned before your throne.

- Perhaps you have been thinking the same thing: Not me Lord, I can't be joyful while you fill in the reason:
  - I'm too old, too young, too broken, too sick. I've lost my job, my child is sick, my wife has died. All this, Lord, but You're so often distant. Where's the help God? Why can't I feel you? Where's the miracles Jesus worked? How can I be joyful? Don't be ridiculous.
  - Certainly there are plenty of reason not to be joyful, good and valid reasons. We're not called to ignore them, put blinders on and forge ahead as if nothing were wrong. But it is precisely here that Jesus is asking us as He did with the two blind men, "Do you believe I could do this?"
  - Very simply (simple? Yes. Easy?!? Absolutely not!!) especially in the midst of challenge and difficulty, we're called to trust in God. We are called to respond with the faith of the two blind men and put our trust in Jesus.
  - ***Behold, here is your God.***
- And God seeks to be present to us, to hold us gently, to care for us faithfully. And God does it in so many ways, through so many people. THIS is why I must rejoice.
  - And on a good day, I can imagine how God would share all of this with me. God would say something like this:
  - Look, Robbie, (as I've told you, I think that God calls me Robbie since my mother did), Robbie, you've got to trust me.
  - As for this pastor thing, Do not be afraid. Jeremiah was too young. Moses stuttered. Peter betrayed me and Paul persecuted me. If I can work with them, I can work with you.
  - As for the prayer thing, you put in the time, I'll do the work.
    - But Robbie, get this straight, nothing you do on any given day is more important even if it seems more urgent.

- Prayer makes you holy and humble, Robbie, and they need a holy and humble pastor. Oh, and, by the way, Robbie, let Me get a word in edgewise sometimes.
- As for your schedule, 24 hours a day is plenty but you have to listen to Me. Don't avoid the difficult things. Dig in; we'll work together. Stop procrastinating. Turn off the television.
- As for the people, just show them Jesus.
  - With the sick, keep them in prayer, Robbie, go visit them and make sure they know I am present especially when they suffer. I'll be at work in my own way and time.
  - In difficult situations, Robbie, I'll do the talking. Just let me use your lips (by the way, you use them a little too often).
  - The same thing with the country and the truth about justice and morality and doctrine. I'll tell you what to say and how to say it in the most pastoral way.
  - Not everyone will be happy – after all the rich young man went away sad but enough will hear and they will make the difference in the world. You just keep listening and praying so you know what I want you to say.
- And remember, Robbie, BE PATIENT. .
  - I know you hate that “p” word, Robbie, so I had Saint James say it again in our second reading, not once, not twice, not three times, but FOUR times. Be patient with me, Robbie, as your God, with yourself, with others and with your situation.
  - Be patient, keep at it, and I will lead you to the joy.

- God comes to us to be close to us, to be present to us, to forgive us, to love us, to support us.
  - God asks us to be patient refusing to fix our problems with a twitch of the nose like Samantha on Bewitched.
  - No, God asks us to be patient because God sits with us in the mire and waits with us to strengthen us to use us, our gifts and talents, now according to God's plan, to solve those same problems, mine and those of the world.
  - I pray for you in this holy season of Advent that you will be granted this gift:
    - a better understanding of how God comes to you, not just at Christmas but all year through,
    - a renewed awareness of God's active presence in your life
    - a stronger trust in God's ability to use you and the talents already given and those around you to help take care of those problems, and a deeper sense of joy.
  
- Let me close with a quote from Pope Francis (Joy of the Gospel) who gives great insight in working towards this joy: No one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we...realize that he is already there, waiting for us...Now is the time to say to Jesus...I need you. Save me once again, Lord...How good it feels to come back to him...With a tenderness which never disappoints,... [God] is always capable of restoring our joy... makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and start anew...let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards! AMEN.