

**Third Sunday of Advent – Year C**  
**(Dec. 16, 2012)**

**Rejoice or Mourn? (Newtown, Conn.)**

On this third Sunday of Advent the church tells us to rejoice, and we hear it repeated in our first and second readings. But there will be little or no rejoicing in Newtown, Conn., as people try to cope with the tragedy that occurred there on Friday.

In an article on the op-ed page of the *Washington Post* yesterday the author began by saying “There are no words for this.” And that is true – there are no words for this. There is no adequate way to comfort the parents, relatives, and friends of the children who were killed in that incredible act of madness. Is there anything we can do in the face of such a situation? Perhaps there is, and I’ll come back to that after a few words about our readings today.

Both Zephaniah in the first reading and Paul in the second tell us to rejoice. Now it helps I think to realize what was going on when these two wrote those words. Zephaniah is writing for the people in exile in Babylon. They are suffering, unhappy, mourning their lives away from their homes, away from the temple, their great symbol of God’s presence among them. Has God abandoned them? Is God no longer with them? Are they no longer God’s people? Zephaniah writes to assure them that God has not left them. If anything God is with them in their suffering. God still loves them. In fact God loves them in spite of their sinfulness, and nothing they do can make God love them any less. He tells them to rejoice because they will be delivered, they will return home and rebuild their temple and live once more in the land where they found freedom and happiness. And indeed it comes to pass.

Paul on the other hand is in prison when he writes this letter to his dear friends at Philippi. He is sure that he will not be released and just as sure that he faces certain death. And yet, he says “Rejoice.” It seems unbelievable that someone in his situation could say, “Rejoice,” and even repeat it, “Again I say rejoice!” as if to emphasize the love and care of a good God whom he trusts completely.

Is there anything we can learn from these readings that can be a help on this day when we are all overwhelmed by tragedy? Paul tells the Philippians to pray and never cease praying. We can all certainly do that. Pray for the people of Newtown, especially the parents, brothers, and sisters of the children who were killed. Pray for the families of the teachers who died with them. Pray for the brother of the man who did the killing and even killed their mother. Pray that they may not lose faith in God because of the terrible evil they have experienced, pray that their trust and confidence remain strong, and they not turn their backs on God who is in fact with them in their suffering.

And pray for ourselves as well, that we may know and understand that what happened on Friday affects us as well. We are all sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and what affects any one of us is somehow felt by all of us. And then we can also pray that we have the strength and courage to do whatever we can with the help of God to prevent something like this from happening again. We can begin by loving our neighbor as ourselves – or better still loving one another as Jesus loved us according to his instructions to the apostles. I know that many of us are outraged by the seeming impotence of our government to come to grips with this kind of violence. We can urge the politicians to put aside politics and come to a solution that will secure the safety of all our people, from the youngest to the eldest, and make this truly the land of the free and the home of the brave.

The Church tells us to rejoice today – and we can rejoice, in spite of the sadness we must feel in our sympathy for the people of Newtown. We know that God loves us all very, very much – and that is reason to rejoice. It's what we celebrate at Christmas time. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son that all who believe in him may have eternal life." Pray, dear friends, pray, never cease praying, and then act, act in the love and grace of God.