

**Homily by Most Rev. Felipe J. Estévez  
for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi Mass**

December 12, 2020

St. Francis of Assisi Mission, Yulee

*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice... (for) the Lord is near.*

Children like to have fun, to play with their friends. And a mother and father are glad when they see their child for the first time. They experience joy – a very profound gladness, the gladness of the soul, deep within, for joy is so spiritual. In St. Paul’s words to the Christians of Philippi, he tells them to rejoice for the coming of the Lord, the Lord is near, the Savior is reaching out to you! (Phil 4, 4)

We are people walking in fear because of the menacing pandemic. We are a people who regret not gathering with loved ones at Christmas. Some of us are fearful of our uncertain situations like our jobs, our stocks, our back up securities or even our country’s future. More than ever, we are thirsty for joy.

The people that the prophet Isaiah wrote to were in a similar situation. Isiah announced the coming of the One who is to “heal the brokenhearted and who would bring a year of favor from the Lord.” The hope the prophet announced can be applied to us today. It is not based on a political leader’s actions or some magical mindset of ours from a self-help talk, but purely by God’s doings in history, what some spiritual writers call: the *marabilia Dei* – the graces of God happening in the here and now! God’s activity in our lives made our Founding Fathers affirm: In God, we trust. We dare to be a people who trust because our certitude relies upon what Paul said to the Philippians: “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.”

This Monday (Dec. 14, 2020), the Church will celebrate the feast of the mystical doctor, St. John of the Cross, and in one of his sayings, he states: “in the inner stillness where meditation leads, the Spirit secretly anoints the soul and heals our deepest wounds.”

The invitation to move into stillness is the right disposition we need today – to experience the joy that comes with the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord. That is why the Church prays like this: “it is by his gift that already we rejoice at the mystery of his Nativity, so that he may find us watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise.”

St. Francis of Assisi celebrated Christmas this way, “exultant in his praise.” Francis made a living crib near the town of Greccio, asking for an ox, and ass with a stable anticipating the joy of the celebration. He was the first in 1223 to create the manger, creche for Christmas eve, a practice that I wish every Catholic business owner would do in his or her place as a sign of religious freedom in our country or each of our parents would do at home. For really what is the reason for the season – Jesus is the reason for the season!

It is known that St. Francis took great care of the ox, the ass after the celebration because all of creation was part of the celebration as Pope Francis reminds us in the 21st century in *Laudato Si*, that we are to protect the environment, nature, the whole of the created world our common home.

Sin is the great enemy of joy. That is why the preparation for the Nativity of the Lord is preceded by Advent. Children pay attention to the wreath. In every parish, thanks to the great generosity of our priests, we have parish penance services. It really fits with the true spirit of Christmas.

St. John of the Cross wrote about “ the healing of our deepest wounds”...our addictive behaviors, our negative patterns, our corrosive commentaries in social media, our indifference towards others in need and our unrecognized omissions.

Thomas Merton named it so well: “our false self,” which contradicts the true self God intends for us to be, which simply put is a holy self which our baptism calls each of us to be. The commercialization of Christmas needs to be pushed back by the penitential season of Advent, which leads us to prepare our hearts “to find us watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise.”

The Hebrew root of Emmanuel is El: God-emmanu: with us,” it is a marvelous song part of our repertoire since the 1200s, from the time of St. Francis and St. Claire to today, sang in all Christian Churches and loved in the secular city by all people of goodwill...it invites the listener to “rejoice and rejoice because the Emmanuel shall come to thee!”