

A few years ago I overheard some altarservers discussing why the third candle on the advent wreath was a different color. After careful consideration they decided that it almost red because it was a signal to warn you that Christmas was coming.

I didn't think that "a warning" was what the church had in mind, but in fact with the third week of advent there is less than two weeks left for last minute Christmas shopping in crowded stores, to send overdue Christmas cards, to get ready for parties and to make sure that all the trimmings are in place. We had to start mass that day before I got the chance to explain that the "rose" colored candle is suppose indicate joy and excitement rather than fatigue and frenzy.

As I think about that incident I realize that in real life those kids were probably pretty accurate about what the third week of advent means to most folk. This is the time when we really experience our limitations:

- there are more places to be and things to do than there are hours in our day.
- We sing along about Santa checking his list of who is "naughty and nice" and we realize that we are not yet who and what we want to be.
- We eat too much, we drink too much, we wait too long, react too fast, work too hard. Our lives are busier than they should be.

Yet here we sit and listen to readings that tell us to rejoice, to be glad, to exalt!

"Bah, Humbug!" probably comes easily to the lips instead. Maybe that is just what the readings today can prevent. In the midst of darkness and bleakness, the scriptures say, we do find God with us. The lord is in our midst, among us, right here beside us, accepting our limitations and loving us not because we are so marvelous and lovable, but because he is a loving God.

"Bah, Humbug!" You might be tempted to think again. Those nice sounding words won't get me through the hectic weeks ahead. **But they could.** They could if we don't have too narrow a view of salvation.

Too many of us grew up thinking salvation meant that if things work out right you wouldn't go to hell when you die. That is too narrow, too far away.

Some claim that salvation means you manage to say that "Jesus is Lord," accept him as your savior. That's not enough either. It feels a little more reassuring, its on the right track, but the lord is bigger than that.

The broader view recognizes the saving presence of god is at work in our lives whenever people and events help us to do better, heal what hurts, free us from worries, brighten our future. Occasionally we have that recognition in times of crisis -- or at least we see it more clearly then, but more often it happens in everyday events when we get an encouraging word from a co-worker, when the homecare nurse comes to our aid during an illness, when a friend stops by to visit, when the children manage to hang three ornaments in a row on the tree without quarreling.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words from a German prison camp in 1945, "Only he who gives thank for little things receives big things." That is a powerful message on this third Sunday of advent. If we do not recognize God's gifts and graciousness in our daily life, will we truly be able to receive the greater gifts of the eternal salvation that we long for?

If we want to celebrate the lord's entry into human history at Christmas, we need to celebrate his presence in all the events of life. Knowing that he is at our side and that there is more going on around us than the routine and the struggle, can relieve the fatigue and frenzy of the days before Christmas and restore the joy and excitement.

Shout for joy // sing joyfully // be glad and exult with all your heart // the lord is in your midst // dismiss all anxiety from your minds for god's own peace will stand guard over your hearts.

Those aren't just catchy lyrics for an advent song. Those words are very soul of the Christian belief, they give life to our faith, they give meaning to our life. If we allow those words to color our attitude today and in days to come, then our Advent preparation has been a success.