



Rejoice in the Lord Always!

Each Spring for the past four years, a “volunteer tree” in our backyard has tried to spring back to life only to slowly wither a bit more, until this year, when there wasn’t enough life left in it to keep going. We had postponed the decision to remove it because the few branches left would provide small red berries that the birds seemed to enjoy. I got out my trusty chain saw and in short order the tree was down, cut up and the branches hauled off to yard waste. I then went at the stump and in a couple of hours the whole thing became the tree of blessed memory.

I then transplanted a small Japanese maple sapling that had been a

“volunteer tree” in the garden at the rectory of St. Andrews, Grimsby where I had just finished a nine-month interim appointment. Its parent tree is a glorious Japanese maple that has stood for decades in the front lawn of the rectory. The sapling is a beautiful reminder of my time at St. Andrews and will hopefully stand for decades to come in our backyard.

The third Sunday in the season of Advent presents us with the theme of joy. We light the rose candle in the Advent wreath and on our inward journey of preparation to welcome the king of kings at Christmas, there is a lightening of the penitential focus in this season. The words joy and rejoice are salted through the readings from the prophets Zephaniah and Isaiah along with the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians.

And then we have John the Baptist recorded in the Gospel of Luke. You might read these words about winnowing forks, axes lying at the roots of trees and unquenchable fire wondering where

any rejoicing can be found here! It all sounds rather ominous and foreboding, but the Good News is that there is cause for full rejoicing in these words because they focus us beyond the present toward the future, from what is to what can be when people lay hold of life that truly is life.

Life that truly is life. This theme brings the words of Luke into perspective with Zephaniah, Isaiah and Paul, all of whom point toward a future where the people of God have put away the things that draw them from the love of God and may ultimately lead to their own destruction.

St Paul writes to his beloved Church of Philippi in modern day Greece. He has exhorted the faithful there to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, to look to the interests of others in the imitation of Christ who did not count equality with God as something to be grasped. (2:4-6). He can then proclaim with confidence: "Rejoice always and again I say rejoice!" (4:4). Isaiah who has written of a fruit bearing shoot springing forth from the stump of the House of Jesse (11:1), points an exiled people toward a time of renewal and restoration (12:2-3) as does Zephaniah (3:20) who envisions a time of restoration as the people return not only to their land but to their God.

In this Advent three week of rejoicing, what are the things in life that draw you from the love of God? What needs to be "put away" so that you may bear fruit worthy of repentance, living the Great Commandment to love God, neighbour and self in equal measure while responding to the Great Commission to go into our hurting and divided world with words and actions that cause others to move toward renewal and rejoicing?

Planting a tree is an act of faith. I will never stand under the shade of that tiny Japanese maple planted in our garden in the place of the dying tree that was there, but I think of the people who planted the tree that was our sapling's parents. Did they think of the remarkable tree that it would become or that its progeny would make its way to Kingston? When we bear fruit worthy of repentance, we have the potential to sow good seed that will spring to life in ways we can never imagine. This is indeed cause for rejoicing!

