

THE STARTING LINE CAN LEAD US TO TRUE JOY

At times I have been amazed at the beauty that is offered to us while moving from one place to another. Running along the river I have been in awe at the hawks circling and the herons perched near the bank. The time I witnessed an eagle catch a fish in flight and saw it bring the fish to a tree branch before taking off to its nest was spectacular. All of this wonder is out there just waiting to be seen. I find it easy to be caught up in the wonder found in creation, but that is not the only place we are to look. We are to find joy in the smiles of a community that comes together and loads cars up for the food pantry and in the smile of a child when a parent gives them the giving tree cards to place in the box. Priceless joy is found in knowing that great learning comes when a little one participates in taking care of another. Joy happens in the anticipation of presents being unwrapped and love being communicated when time is taken to get the details right. Joy fills the air with beautiful songs and carols being sung and the streets filled with houses decorated. Nothing is to be ignored. From illumination presentations to special time cooking in kitchens, energy and happiness seem to call out, wanting to be noticed.

Being noticed and being seen is a consistent message that surrounds us. Being seen and noticed for who we really are is to be a fulfilling joy. But so often we hide who we are, we are ashamed of our brokenness and sinfulness. We struggle to sometimes even accept ourselves. This week we are to use our time going way beyond the surface to a reality that is unshakable. The Prophet Zephaniah gives us the key. He says our joy comes from a source that never runs out, never ends, and is given to us because the Lord has removed His judgment against us. We are forgiven. That is the starting line of epic proportions. God's judgment of us as sinners has been removed. His condemnation of us has been eliminated. If this is true for us, and it is, it is true for everyone. We and everyone else are forgiven. This true source of a joy the world cannot contain is the Divine gift of Redemption. We are to live as sinners redeemed. He invites us to be renewed in His love.

The journey that unites all of us is one of acceptance. Acceptance of ourselves is the greatest and roughest journey of all. Inadequacies, self-doubt, brokenness all become loud voices that can keep us from hearing that we are loved by a mighty Savior who announced relentlessly our sins are forgiven. The joy that flourishes from that place of forgiveness cannot be contained if we let it in and if we allow ourselves to believe it.

Most of all of the races that I ever ran, I ran with doubt. It was hard to accept I was no better, faster, or swifter. Yet on a particular Monday, Patriots Day in Boston, at one of the early miles in the Boston Marathon, an owner of a business covered up the windows of his establishment with mirrored coverings from top to bottom, from one side to the other. He sat outside his building with a microphone to proclaim a simple message. He called out to each and every runner to look at themselves in the mirror and he said, "Look at yourselves, you are running the Boston Marathon!" He wanted everyone to see themselves as a runner on this historic course. He does this every year and calls out to all the runners, from the elite ones who lead the race until the very last runner passes by. He communicates but one message over and over again—See yourself as you are, you are amazing. It was very moving to me at that moment. As I continued on the course, I returned to that message often and contemplated what he had said. It grounded me. To this day, that race remains my fastest and best marathon.

Jesus has one message; we are forgiven. He states this over and over. We are loved as we are, imperfect and flawed. We can only be ourselves and just being ourselves is to be loved and cherished by God. We are amazing in God's eyes. When we can embrace the reality that judgment has been removed and we can stop judging ourselves, we will find joy like no other. May our week in Advent lead us to this kind of joy.



Fr. John