

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In a December 7<sup>th</sup> news release by Gallup, the headline announced: “Americans’ Mental Health Ratings Sink to New Low.” It’s a self-reported statistic. “How would you describe your own mental health or emotional wellbeing at this time?” And overall, the decline was significant. Since 2001, more than 80% Americans rated their mental health as good or excellent — last year it was 85%. This year that combined number dropped to 76%, 9 points less. The report posits that the low number was “undoubtedly influenced by the coronavirus pandemic, which continues to profoundly disrupt people’s lives, but may also reflect views of the election and the state of race relations, both of which were on Americans’ minds this year.” ([news.gallup.com](https://news.gallup.com), “Americans’ Mental Health Ratings Sink to New Low,” Megan Brennan, December 7, 2020).

What was interesting, though, was that the detail of every demographic (male or female, Republican or Democrat, white or non-white, married or unmarried, etc.) declined except one: those who attended religious services weekly. That statistic went up 4 points! Of those Americans who attend church weekly, 4% more rate their mental health as good or excellent! We Christians, of course, understand this, for weekly we hear the good news of great joy, foretold by the prophets, fulfilled in Jesus.

It’s not this Sunday of Advent that is known for “joy” — that was last Sunday. Following the one-year series of texts, last Sunday is called *Gaudete* — rejoice! It’s marked liturgically with rose-colored paraments and a rose Advent candle. The name actually comes from the first words of the introit for that Sunday. The introit for the Third Sunday in Advent begins with the antiphon from Philippians 4:4 — “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*” *Gaudete!*

*Gaudete* was missing for us last Sunday along with the color rose as we use the three-year series — not that there was no hint of rejoicing at all last Sunday. Our epistle began “*Rejoice always*” (1 Thess. 5:16); and the Old Testament reading included the exclamation “*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation*” (Isa. 61:10). That makes sense, if we are to “*Rejoice in the Lord always.*”

This week’s Gospel, too, has a connection to rejoicing with Luke’s many uses of words in the “rejoice” word group, various words that get translated “rejoice,” “joy,” “grace or favor,” “give,” “gift,” “give thanks,” etc. With these words ringing in my ear, if you will, I’m using this Sunday as *Gaudete* transferred.

Joy is often associated with gifts and giving. Speaking about one of the words used in our text, a scholar writes, the “linguistic starting point is the sense of ‘making glad by gifts’” (TDNT, IX:394). Such joy is often spontaneous, flowing

out of the gift given without expectation. Responding to a gift by giving thanks often has to be taught, but not the delight of receiving a gift.

On the other hand, unmet expectations can make one grumpy and ill-mannered. Indulge me for a moment with an illustration from Harry Potter. In the second chapter of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, it was Harry's cousin Dudley's birthday. If you're not familiar with Harry Potter, it wouldn't take you long to figure out that Dudley is a most unpleasant fellow. Here's the short scene. Dudley enters into the kitchen to count his presents on the table. "His face fell," Rowling writes. "'Thirty-six?' he said looking up at his mother and father. 'That's two less than last year.'" Dudley became red in the face, and Harry worried about Dudley throwing a temper tantrum. You would think Dudley could have mustered up a bit of joy at receiving 36 presents, but 36 was not enough. To calm him down, his mother had to promise that they would go out and buy two more presents.

How different for a young maid from Nazareth in Galilee. Mary was this maid, betrothed to Joseph of the house of David. She was still a virgin, for she and Joseph had not yet consummated their marriage. Mary herself had no illusions of grandeur; she certainly didn't expect what was about to happen to her.

The angel Gabriel appeared to her, and greeted her with a word from that "rejoice" word group I mentioned. "χαῖρε" — "hail," or "greetings" many of our translations render it. The New King James version translates it, "*Rejoice!*" The news he was about to deliver was certainly an occasion for joy.

Gabriel then calls Mary a title using another of those words: "κεχαριτωμένη" — O favored one. This participle is passive; there is no hint of worthiness in it, but of gift. There is no hint that Mary was herself "preserved immune from all stain of original sin," conceived immaculately, as Pope Pius IX declared as dogma in 1854 and as our Roman Catholic friends are obliged to confess (Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶491). Nor can it be shown from this Gospel or from Scripture as a whole that "by the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long" (¶493).

To be sure, Mary had "*found favor* [χαρίν] *with God,*" as Gabriel told her. There is another word from this "rejoice" word group. And what this favor, this grace, is, Gabriel would tell her right away. It was not to be free of sin herself, but that she had been chosen to be the vessel through whom "*the Son of the Most High*" God would be born. Mary would give birth to a son, conceived in her by the Holy Spirit to be both God and flesh, the Savior of the world. The name Jesus proclaims that. From her womb would be born the long-promised Christ, the everlasting King over the house of Jacob. Legally, through Joseph, He would be of the line of David, but His flesh would come from His mother alone.

What an honor! What grace! What a miracle! Luther says, “What can be said that is more marvelous than this, that the Son of God assumes the flesh of man and is born of a virgin?” (Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, ¶3007).

But as with all miracles, one wonders — especially we do in this scientific age, “How can this be?” Mary wondered it herself. She didn’t doubt like John the Baptist’s father Zechariah did, who was struck dumb for his unbelief, but she did wonder about the mechanism. Mary was young, but she did know these biological facts. Thus, she asked, “*How will this be, since I do not know a man?*”

Gabriel answers Mary describing the miracle of her son’s conception without the aid of man, but only by the Holy Spirit. This is the Lord’s doing! God does in Mary what is impossible for Mary to do by herself. “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Your son, Mary, will be the holy, Son of God.*” And in these words, as Luther teaches, Christ comes to Mary not only in her heart “as she hears, grasps, and believes” them, but He comes also into her womb to begin His earthly sojourn there (*Luther’s Works*, 36:341).

Mary does grasp and believe these words, for she responds to the angel’s words humbly accepting this grace. “*Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*” This story ends here with the angel departing, but joy surely continues to fill Mary’s soul, for she arises to visit her cousin Elizabeth, also great with child as Gabriel reported to Mary. And Elizabeth’s son “leaped for joy” in his mother’s womb as they met the Son of God and His mother (Luke 1:44). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth spoke some marvelous things about Mary and the fruit of her womb.

And then Mary could hold it back no longer. Her joy burst forth in song: “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*” (Luke 1:46-47). Now I admit, these last two references to joy and rejoicing don’t come from the same “rejoice” word group I’ve been talking about, but think not that the joy is diminished. Quite the contrary. It overflowed. Whereas earlier Mary rejoiced at the gift, here Mary is even more overtaken with joy; she is overjoyed at the giver: God her Savior.

And so are we. What a marvelous thing God did through Mary, sending His own Son into our flesh from the Virgin! But it wasn’t just marvelous for Mary; through her, the Lord, who is our strength and song, became our salvation, and that is marvelous in our eyes (Ps. 118:14, 23).

Yes, today, not just Mary is overjoyed in this good news; not just her soul magnifies the Lord; not just her spirit exults in God her Savior. Ours do, for it’s for us and for our salvation.

Mental illness is serious and should be treated seriously and with compassion. We shouldn’t downplay its seriousness. Nevertheless, regarding this Gallup poll

and Americans' mental health self-assessment, I suggest that filled with the joy that comes from the message of Christ, from the forgiveness of our sins, from the hope of everlasting life, how can Christians report anything but "good" or "excellent" about their "mental health or emotional wellbeing" — unless it be, I don't know, "marvelous"? Indeed, let us rejoice in God's gift to mankind through Mary; let us rejoice with exultation in the Giver; and let us tell out, our souls, this marvelous news of the greatness of the Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.