

Three days after I was ordained priest this past June was my birthday.

What I thought was going to be my best gift that day was that after all of the festivities of ordinations and first Masses of the past three days — I was going to sleep in.

And so I did.

I had breakfast with my parents, and then packed up my bags and headed to St. Louis for Archbishop Carlson's installation.

My plans weren't to go directly there, though. I was making a detour through South Bend to visit my brother, his wife, and my little niece.

The weather didn't cooperate, and I drove through a bunch of rough storms. Finally things let up, just as I was driving on the Indiana Turnpike.

I pulled onto the exit, and in a few minutes, I was at my brother's house. I got out of my truck, and I heard my niece's voice through the opened window shouting "Uncle David's here! Uncle David's here!"

She came running out of the house with a neatly wrapped box, followed by Gusto, the yellow lab. Gusto made a point to cover my clerical black clothes with as much blonde hair as possible before my brother reigned him in.

My niece was hopping up and down on the front lawn saying, over and over, "Open it! Open it! Open it!" She kept this up on her way into the house, where my sister-in-law had prepared a drink for me, and I found out that my brother had steaks grilling in the back yard.

I finally opened the gift, and it was a beautiful white priest's stole — which at that moment, I realized I had forgotten to pack one. This one was much nicer than anything I owned, and I was pleased and grateful to receive such a wonderful gift.

In all three readings, we hear almost the same thing repeated over and over:

The Prophet Zepaniah tells us twice:

"The Lord is in your midst."

"The Lord, your God, is in your midst."

St. Paul tells us once:

"The Lord is near."

And in the Gospel, St. John the Baptist tells us:

"One mightier than I is coming."

God is here. God is near. God is coming.

That is the whole point of Advent. Today is the third Sunday, and the Church allows the priest to shed the penitential purple vestments for rose-colored ones. In a sense, we're called upon to "lighten up" in our penitential practices.

Why?

Because the Lord is near.

And our reaction to this news should affect us as the Prophet Zephaniah tells us:

*Shout for joy, O daughter Zion!
Sing joyfully, O Israel!
Be glad and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

And so today, as we move past the half-way point of Advent ... let us "lighten up" ... as it were ... rejoice ... be glad ... exult ... and be filled with joy ... because "God is here!" "God is near!" "He's coming!"

Like my niece's joy at being able to have a birthday party for me, let us pray for a joyful spirit as we move toward the end of Advent.

And as we approach this altar to receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ ... let us ask to receive the graces of joy, gladness, and exultation. So that we may "shout for joy" and "sing joyfully" ... "with all [our] heart[s]" ... because we are the sons and daughters of God the Father, redeemed in Jesus Christ, and filled with the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit.