

Sermon for December 11, 2022—“The Joy of Advent”

Third Sunday of Advent Year A—Texts: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 1:57-80

The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. “Gaudete,” is Latin for “rejoice”. We know that Advent is a season of waiting and today we are called to be joyful as we await the coming of Jesus Christ.

God, through Zephaniah, offers us glimpses of a hopeful future and calls us to “Rejoice and exult with all our heart.” Other prophets remind us of the ways God has delivered us, is delivering us, and will deliver us. Isaiah invites us to shout aloud and sing for joy because we shall “draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation.” And Paul, as we know, strongly urges us to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

We have been experiencing tough times these last few years. With the suffering, loss, uncertainty, and state of our beautiful, yet broken world, how can we hear these words and rejoice? In our minds, joy tends to overlap with happiness. Happiness is often connected with what is happening to us and around us—our circumstances. Happiness usually lasts for just a season, a relatively short time.

When we are discouraged and afraid, rejoicing in the Lord can be a hard sell. But the truth is that joy is not usually inspired by happy circumstances. Poet and author David Whyte writes, “To feel a full and untrammled joy is to have become fully generous; to allow ourselves to be joyful is to have walked through the doorway of fear.” And joy, unlike happiness, lasts – no matter what the challenges.

The prophets looked forward to the day of the Lord’s coming as a time of great joy. Even Zephaniah, who has been called the most despondent of the prophets, kept the last word for joy, joy over the Lord’s presence, joy over renewal and restoration, and joy over coming home. Likewise, while Isaiah also speaks of doom and gloom, he looks forward to the Lord’s coming as a time for shouting joyfully, “Surely God is my salvation.” He looked forward to the Lord’s coming as a day when the people would drink their fill of salvation like someone drawing fresh water from a well, certainly a day of great rejoicing.

Paul was under house arrest when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. How incredible! He’s imprisoned, yet could still say, “Rejoice!” One might wonder what he had to rejoice about in that situation. Well, Paul rejoiced because he looked forward to the Lord’s coming, but he also rejoiced because the Lord is always near. Paul seemed to have experienced the Lord’s constant presence in his imprisonment. And so, he could say, “Rejoice!” Paul carried the joy of Advent with him wherever he went—even into a Roman jail.

Advent is not only a season for waiting. It is also a time of preparation—a time of looking for the coming of the Lord, for the fulfillment of God’s promised restoration, for the peace that overcomes all violence and injustice, and for that perfect love that casts out fear.

John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Jesus. He was sent into difficult, complicated times, times like we are experiencing right now. And his message was simple: repent; turn your lives around; turn back to God. For John, repentance was not about beating ourselves up for things done or left undone; to repent meant total transformation—transformation that bears fruit.

As you may remember from last week, John the Baptist calls the religious leaders who venture into the desert, snakes. He said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Yet, they do not turn and run. Instead, they listen to his sermon. You must bear fruit, he tells them. Do not rely on your ancestry, your tradition, or your history. This is about you preparing yourselves for the One who is to come. When John finished preaching, they asked “How do we repent?” “What should we do?”

John doesn’t ask the people to change the world, but rather to change themselves. He doesn’t tell them to leave their lives and stay with him or start a revolution; he tells the crowds there to consider sharing what they have with the cold and hungry. He told the tax collectors to be honest and fair. The soldiers, he cautioned to act with integrity, avoiding abuse of their power. “Go home,” John told them. Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your friends. Go home and live your lives as deeply and as generously as you can right now. Do what the Lord requires of you and do it now. Be generous *now*. Be merciful *now*. Do justice *now*.

What does this all mean for us? In this Advent season, are we seeking the answers to the question “What should we do?” As we wait and as we look forward to the coming of the Messiah, are we engaging in the kind of deep self-reflection that leads to action? Or have we fallen into complacency? Are we gathering like the crowds in John’s story, moving toward genuine repentance? Or are we turning away? In our baptisms, we are marked as Christ’s own forever, and it is the meaning of this mark that John called his followers—and us—to embrace. Through baptism, we are cleansed and renewed with water from the springs of salvation before being sent out to serve.

We might think that focusing our attention on what we long for but do not yet have might cause discouragement, rather than joy. But, perhaps, it is that very act of watching and waiting and looking for the coming of God that inspires great joy. The Gospel writer calls John’s exhortation “good news.” And it is, especially if we believe that we are not worthy of God’s saving grace. Nothing in our lives is beyond redemption. Knowing and accepting this is reason enough for rejoicing.

This is not easy. That’s why it takes intentional preparation and repentance – which means amending our lives and turning toward God. That is what we must do to prepare in this holy season. Advent is beckoning us to do just that, and it encourages us with a promise, rather than a threat: the promise of the coming embrace of Christ and the gift of life, abundant and eternal, that he brings.

John the Baptist appeared as an itinerant preacher. Yet, ironically, he is remembered by the Roman Catholic Church as the patron saint of spiritual joy. Perhaps he earned that title since, earlier in Luke’s gospel, Elizabeth voiced how the baby in her womb leaped for joy at the presence of Mary and Jesus. It was John’s great joy to always be pointing to Jesus. Today, it is our great joy to be waiting for the coming of Jesus.

And so, brothers and sisters, here’s the thing: On this Gaudete Sunday, as we wait and prepare, we are also called to rejoice. The coming of the Messiah and the Gospel of Jesus Christ are the Good News the angel will speak of when appearing to the shepherds,

“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

This brings us hope even amid our struggles so that when the Christ child arrives at the manger, we can rejoice and sing with gusto, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come.” For now, we pray, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.”

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Joy of Man’s Desiring.

Amen and amen.