

December 11, 2022
The Third Sunday in Advent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 11:2-15 (Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-11)

REJOICE FOR YOUR KING IS COMING FOR YOU.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Matthew, the 11th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent which is historically named “*Gaudete*” Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for *rejoice*. While Advent is considered a penitential season, today we pause in the midst of our repentant sorrow to *rejoice* in eager anticipation of our Savior’s Advent, Christ’s coming in glory on the Last Day. The rose-colored candle (or pink) on the Advent wreath symbolizes hope and joy. Yet in our Gospel text it sounds as if John the Baptist is without hope and has nothing for to rejoice.

In last week’s Gospel we heard John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness saying:
“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:1–2)

He is the last of the Old Testament prophets and fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy as the forerunner who is preparing the way for the Messiah. (cf: Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1) He believed. He preached. He anticipated the coming of the One who was mightier than he, the One who would baptize all Israel with the Holy Spirit and fire, bringing end-time salvation and judgment on the Last Day. (cf: Matthew 3:11)

As Jesus approached John near the Jordan River prior to His Baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit, John pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (cf: John 1:29) Immediately following Jesus’ Baptism, John’s confession was confirmed as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus as a dove and the Father’s voice from heaven declared Jesus as His beloved Son, with whom He was well pleased. (cf: Matthew 3:17; John 1:32–33)

John was bold in preaching the truth of God’s Law and calling people to repentance. He would not be shaken by the winds of public opinion. Like Elijah, he was a man of the wilderness with no regard as to how he dressed or ate. Even Jesus confesses that John is the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophesy, calling him the greatest among those born of women living under the old covenant of the Law. (cf: Matthew 11:9–11) But Jesus is ushering a new covenant, God’s reign on earth through the work and Word of Christ. Jesus goes on to say that even the least believer who has faith in Him as God and Savior, the tiniest baptized baby, the most timid believer, is greater than John. That includes you and me. Not because of anything in ourselves, but because of the new covenant in Jesus’ blood, the forgiveness of sins, and new life in Christ.

In our Gospel text this morning, John is withering away in prison. In his bold proclamation of the Law, he called King Herod to repentance for marrying his brother's wife. Herod, in turn, had him arrested and thrown into prison. (cf: Matthew 4:12; 14:3) From inside prison, John has heard of Jesus' miracles, His authority over the spirit world and nature, and His authoritative preaching and teaching. Yet, this Messiah did not look like what John had expected. Jesus does not match the end-time message John himself has preached or what he himself is experiencing in prison.

It was a test of John's faith. He would languish in prison for over a year until, unbeknownst to him, he would be beheaded. He had done nothing wrong but had done everything that God had called him to do. Had he misidentified the Messiah and wasted his entire ministry? He was God's prophet who preached how the Christ would release the captives from prison, but now he is the one in prison. (cf: Isaiah 61:1) Could Jesus perform just one more miracle and set him free? Could the one who pointed to Christ as the light of the world, expect that the darkness of his prison be exchanged for brightness of day? As John struggles to live by faith, our text says:

“... he sent word by his disciples³ and said to [Jesus], ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” (Matthew 11:2–3)

Is Jesus the true Savior of the world or is there another? It is a question all believers struggle with at one time or another. Suffering and death are the greatest challenges to the Christian faith and have been since the fall. Call it *theodicy* or the *problem with evil*. If God is loving and holy and good, then how do evil and misery exist in the world? Why must the Christian suffer. If Jesus truly came to bind up the brokenhearted and to set the captives free, why does he allow you, a baptized believer in Christ, to languish in your prison of temptation, pain, and suffering? Sometimes affliction comes fast and furious: losing a job, a child or spouse walks out of your life, or the sudden death of a loved one. Other times it comes in the slow but steady drip, drip, drip as if it were Chinese water torture: abuse, addiction, disease, and division.

On this side of heaven the Christian is never free from the assaults of evil and misery to the body and soul, which leaves the believer doubting about whether God or the devil is in control. But every experience that might lead a person to unbelief, denial, and doubt comes from the devil. God cannot be the cause of evil because He is the cause of everything good. (cf: 1 Timothy 4:4) The devil never leaves the Christian alone, but works harder each day to steal your faith in Christ. John the Baptist was no exception.

In God's hidden wisdom, He does not always answer our prayers the way we wish. He works in mysterious ways to bring about faith and trust in Christ Jesus through tribulation and suffering. Suffering causes you stop trusting in yourself so that you cling to the grace of Christ, take up your own cross and learn from, and follow after Jesus. (cf: Matthew 16:24–26) But to the sinful man, it does not make sense. It is contrary to human expectation. But God's ways are not our ways – and that is a good thing. (cf: Isaiah 55:8) There are three things to remember:

1. There is only one God.
2. You are not Him.
3. Rejoice in the Lord always – for God sent His Son to deliver you from your bondage in prison.

Today we pause in the midst of our repentant sorrow to rejoice in eager anticipation of our Savior's Advent, Christ's coming in glory on the Last Day. Rejoice even when it does not appear that there is anything to rejoice about. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah was sent by God to declare God's wrath to His people who refused to repent and trust in Him alone. The future looked hopeless as Isaiah foretold of the coming destruction at the hands of the Assyrian army and deportation of the survivors to bondage in Babylon.

Yet in our Old Testament reading, Isaiah also proclaims salvation and deliverance for all who trust in God alone. He uses the imagery of a blooming desert to illustrate the physical and spiritual healing that will occur when God returns to redeem his people, both the Israelites from the Babylonian captivity and all believers at the second coming of Christ on the Last Day. All who believe will rejoice with joy and singing when they see the glory of the Lord as He comes with salvation. (cf: Isaiah 35:1–10)

The antiphon of our Introit this morning comes from St Paul's letter to the Philippians, the 4th chapter. Similar to John the Baptist, Paul is sitting in prison as punishment for proclaiming the Good News of salvation in Christ. He knows what it is to suffer in body and spirit. (cf: Philippians 4:12) Yet from his prison cell he writes:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." (Philippians 4:4)

He says *always!* Rejoice *always!* No matter what the circumstances of life may be – rejoice. In Christ you have forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Jesus said:

"... do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

The worst thing that the devil can possibly throw your way can only throw you into your Savior's arms in heaven. That why Paul said:

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21)

He knew that even in the worst of the worst of suffering, he could endure. Not because of himself but because the love of Christ that strengthened him. (cf: Philippians 4:12) He knows that when his last hour comes, our Lord will give him a blessed end, and graciously take him from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven.

In our epistle reading St James gives this encouragement.

"Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." (James 5:7–8)

The return of Jesus on the Last Day shapes the life of the Christian. Having confidence in His return gives us a perspective on how we relate to one another and our sufferings. Suffering causes you stop trusting in yourself so that you cling to the grace of Christ, take up your own cross, and follow Jesus. God promises to remain with you and to take you to Himself in eternity on the Last Day.

John the Baptist would die a martyr's death a little over a year before Jesus would be crucified at the hands of sinful men. Jesus gave John's disciples signs that the Kingdom of God and the Messiah's reign was among them and was working through Word and deed: the blind see, the

lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor hear the Gospel proclaimed. (cf: Matthew 11:4–5) They knew those signs from the prophet Isaiah, signs of the coming kingdom. (cf: Isaiah 35:5–6) Jesus’ miracles served as signs that the age of Messiah had come, and with His coming, that the time of gladness and joy was dawning even in the midst of sorrow and suffering.

But you have even greater signs. You have Jesus’ own death and resurrection. Christ has suffered and died to pay the wages of your sins and was raised for your justification. (cf: Romans 4:25) In Baptism you were united to His death and resurrection, making you His child and heir of His heavenly kingdom. You have Jesus’ word forgiveness of sins, spoken with His authority, in His stead and by His command, that He has paid your debt so that you are free to live in peace. You have Jesus very own body and blood, given and shed for you to strengthen you in all things body and soul unto life everlasting. Blessed are all who are not offended by this Jesus who humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (cf: Philippians 2:8)

Rejoice in the Lord always. You may not feel like it amid your temptations, your suffering and pain. Perhaps you feel more like the Israelites in bondage in Babylon or like John and Paul behind prison walls. But dear Christian: rejoice! The kingdom of heaven and reign of God are among you today. Your Savior comes to you in the remembrance of your Baptism, in His absolution, in His preached Word, and in His body and blood given for you to strengthen you to endure all things until His return on the Last Day.

“Rejoice greatly... Shout aloud... Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation...” (Zechariah 9:9)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.