

December 17, 2023
Third Sunday in Advent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24)

REJOICE FOR YOUR SAVIOR COMES.

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

The Church has historically named this Sunday in Advent “*Gaudete Sunday*.” *Gaudete* is the Latin word for “*rejoice*.” Perhaps you noticed the theme of “*rejoice*” flowing through our Scripture readings. The rose-colored candle (or pink) on the Advent wreath is lit, which symbolizes hope and joy. Advent is considered a penitential season, but on the Third Sunday of Advent we pause in the midst of our repentant sorrow to *rejoice* in eager anticipation of our Savior’s Advent. Christ’s return in glory on the Last Day.

With only a week until we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, it’s tempting to rush to Bethlehem and *rejoice* that God *came* in the flesh of a baby born in a manger, but the season of Advent reminds us that Christmas might not happen this year. You can *rejoice* because, as you just confessed earlier in the Nicene Creed, Jesus is *coming* again in glory to judge both the living and the dead. Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows. (Mark 13:32) It might be today or tomorrow, so *rejoice*!

In the Gradual this morning you heard:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion... your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation...” (Zechariah 9:9)

While the prophet Zechariah expresses the future joy of Christ riding into Jerusalem to redeem our fallen world from the effects of sin by His death and resurrection, it’s also a foreshadowing of a new heaven and a new earth when Christ returns and all who believe will behold God face-to-face and live in Him in eternity. (cf: Revelation 21:1–2)

In our Old Testament reading you heard the prophet Isaiah:

“... greatly rejoice in the Lord.” (Isaiah 61:10)

While proclaiming good news and everlasting joy to the people of Israel whom God would redeem and bring out of bondage in Babylon, it’s also a foreshadowing of Jesus bringing liberty for all held captive in sin and death. By His death and resurrection, He has delivered you from the shame of your sin, removed the sting of death, and clothed you in His righteousness, preparing you for His return on the Last Day.

In our Epistle reading St Paul exhorts you to:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)

... for:

“... the God of peace...”

... who has called you by the Gospel and began a good work in you in the waters of Holy Baptism, will:

“... sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

Finally, while the word “*rejoice*” is not included in our Gospel reading – it’s implied. Our Gospel can be a bit confusing because St. John the Evangelist is writing about John the Baptist. They’re two different men. It’s believed that John the Evangelist is the same person as John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, whom Jesus called to be His disciples. (cf: Matthew 4:21-22) Twelve disciples in all were called to be taught at the foot of the Master. Eleven would be *witnesses* of the earthly ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of the God/man Christ Jesus.

The word *witness* is important in John’s Gospel. When he uses *witness*, it doesn’t quite mean the same thing as when you and I use it to describe our faith in telling others what we believe according to the Bible. No. In John’s Gospel “*to witness*” can be closely related to the notion of being an *eyewitness* to establish the identity of Jesus as God’s own Son. (cf: John 1:14, 12:17, 19:35; Weinrich, John 1:1–7:1, Concordia Commentary, 99)

John the Baptist came as a *witness*. He didn’t appear in the wilderness as a self-appointed preacher. He was *sent* by God, which was planned even before his conception in the womb. The angel Gabriel told John’s father that the child:

“... will go before [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:17)

John was sent from God as His authoritative *eyewitness* to give *testimony* concerning the Christ, the Light who gives light to the whole world, that all might believe through Him. (cf: John 1:7) His message was not “*follow me,*” but “*follow the One to whom I bear witness.*” John was not the Light, but came to bear *witness* about the Light. (cf: John 1:8)

Due to our sinful nature, you and I often confuse the *witness* with his testimony, the message with the messenger. It’s easy to be swayed by appearances. In our day, what a *witness* wears in a courtroom can have a big effect on a jury. Megachurch pastors dress to impress and reach a certain demographic of the population. So John’s dressing in camel’s hair while munching on locusts and wild honey would likely be a big distraction today. But don’t be swayed by appearances. Listen to the testimony. Test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. (cf: 1 John 4:1–2) Test the message to see if it points to Christ alone for forgiveness and salvation, and hold fast to what is good. (cf: 1 Thessalonians 5:21)

The priests and Levites from Jerusalem were fixated on the appearance of the messenger and not listening to his testimony. You and I might confuse the two different Johns, but John the Baptist made it clear that he didn’t want to be mistaken for anyone else. His coming was foretold by Isaiah, and when asked, he said he was not the Christ. (cf: John 1:20) He dressed like the Old Testament prophet Elijah, but when asked he said he was not Elijah. (cf: 2 Kings 1:8) Indeed,

John was the last and greatest of the prophets, the one who was sent to point directly to the Christ, but when asked, he said “*no*,” he wasn’t the prophet that Moses promised to come in Deuteronomy, chapter 18. (cf: John 1:21)

The priests and Levites knew what Scripture said of the coming Messiah. They should’ve recognized the signs; however, their unbelief blinded them. John was pointing to the Light, but their darkened hearts refused to allow their eyes to see. God was working through John to call the Jewish leaders out of their sinful darkness and into His marvelous light... into the light of Jesus Christ. John was giving them a reason to *rejoice*, but they were lost in unbelief. They were running out of questions and had no answers to give to the Pharisees so they asked:

“What do you say about yourself?”²³ [And John] ***said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness...”*** (John 1:22–23)

John wasn’t sent to talk about himself, to deliver stirring personal testimonials, or to win a huge following. He was sent to prepare a people for the coming Messiah by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He was the voice crying out that now is the time to repent and be baptized because the Lord was near. (cf: Matthew 3:2) John knew he was nothing and Jesus is everything. Jesus must increase and John must decrease. (cf: John 3:30)

The religious leaders were still not hearing John’s testimony but only looking at appearances. If he wasn’t the Christ or Elijah or the prophet:

“They asked him, ‘Then why are you baptizing...’” (John 1:25)

But John refuses even to consider their question. A Greater One than John was coming. In fact, the Greater One was already standing in their midst, in the same crowd, listening to the questions, hidden, soon to be revealed. The light of the world was about to dawn. St John records that:

“The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29)

It was only then that John answered the religious leaders question about his baptizing saying:

“... I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ... “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:31–34)

Due to our sinful nature, you and I often confuse the *witness* with his testimony, the message with the messenger. But don’t be swayed by appearances. Listen to the testimony. Test the spirits to see whether they are from God. And you know exactly where to go to hear the voice preparing the way and pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It’s wherever the Gospel is preached in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. In that place you will hear the voice crying out in this wilderness of sin and terror and death... a voice to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ Name... a voice pointing to Christ, and Him crucified for you. He is the One. He is your forgiveness, your life,

and your salvation. He is the true light that light shines in the darkness. (cf: John 1:5) He is the true light which gives light to everyone. (cf: John 1:9)

He's in the water of your Baptism, cleansing you by the washing of water with the word. (cf: Ephesians 5:26) He's in the words of Absolution forgiving your sin. He's in the bread that is His body and in the wine that is His blood to sustain you in body and soul unto like everlasting. That's what being a **witness** to Jesus means. Not pointing to yourself and saying, "*Be religious like me.*" But pointing to Jesus in the Word, in the water, in the bread and the wine, and testifying on His behalf: "*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away your sin and the sin of the whole world.*" He is the once for all time perfect sacrifice.

Earlier I said that in John's Gospel "**to witness**" is related to the notion of being an **eyewitness** to establish the identity of Jesus as God own Son. The word for **witness** is also the same word from which we get the word "**martyr.**" A **witness** is a **martyr** who testifies unto his or her death. You might lose your head, as John did. But not to worry. You've already died in Jesus. You were buried into His death in Baptism and were clothed in His righteousness. (cf: Romans 6:3-5; Galatians 3:27) You are dead to the world, dead to sin, dead to death. And your life is safely hidden in Christ, tucked away where no one can take it. You've got nothing to lose. You can **rejoice!** You can boldly bear **witness** to Christ.

That's the beauty of being dead to sin and dead to yourself, but alive to God in Christ. (cf: Romans 6:11) You don't have to hide under a false identity, like some frightened **witness** with a death threat over your head. You don't have to put on rose-colored glasses of phony piety and religion. You can be yourself, telling the truth about your sin, and even more about your Savior, the world's Savior who takes away the sin of the world. You can point to Jesus, the light of the world. Whoever follows Him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (cf: John 8:12) He's coming again soon. Rejoice, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation.

Amen.

"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). Amen.