December 15, 2024
Third Sunday in Advent
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Luke 7:18 – 28 (Zephaniah 3:14–20; Philippians 4:4–7)

REJOICE!

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

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is historically named "***Gaudete***" Sunday. ***Gaudete*** is the Latin word for "***rejoice***." ***Rejoice*** if definitely the theme of the day – yet – in our Gospel lesson, it sounds like the last thing on John the Baptist's mind is to ***rejoice***.

Among those born of women none is greater than John the Baptist. (cf: Luke 7:28) He was called as God's prophet, a voice of one crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Messiah. (cf: Luke 3:3–6) Like the Old Testament prophets before him, John wasn't one to shy away from confrontation. He didn't play favorites. Whether preaching to the rich and famous or the poor and powerless, he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins because of the coming judgment of God. (cf: Luke 3:3–17)

By all accounts recorded in Holy Scripture, John was a faithful forerunner of the Messiah. But suddenly this forerunner is pulled from action and placed on the bench. He's no longer preparing the way but sitting in prison. After calling Herod to repentance for committing adultery by marrying his brother's wife, Herod had John arrested and thrown into jail. (cf: Mark 6:16–20)

The disciples of John went to him in prison and told him of all the things Jesus was doing: His preaching, teaching, and His miracles. And when John heard these things, our text says:

> ***"[19] calling two of his disciples to him,*** [John] ***sent them to the Lord, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'"*** (Luke 7:19)

Scholars have long debated why John sent his disciples to ask Jesus this question. One school of thought is that while sitting in prison, John begins to doubt that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. John has heard of all that Jesus was doing – yet – Jesus doesn't look like the Messiah that John expected.

John had been preparing for the One whose ax was already laid to the root of fruitless trees to cut them down and throw into the fire. (cf: Luke 3:9) More powerful than John's water baptism, the One who was to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He would come with a winnowing fork in His hand to clear the threshing floor, gathering His faithful wheat into the kingdom of heaven while burning the unfaithful chaff in the fires of hell and eternal damnation. (cf: Luke 3:15–17)

But this Messiah carries neither an ax nor a winnowing fork. John sees no gathering or burning – but humble compassion and love. Jesus' kingdom doesn't look to John like a kingdom of

judgement and power, but a kingdom of humility and grace. Jesus wasn't the Messiah that John expected.

The other scholarly school of thought is that John sent his disciples to question Jesus for the sake of John's own disciples, to reassure them that Jesus really is the One, the Messiah, the coming One they'd been waiting for. John had witnessed the Spirit descend upon Jesus at His Baptism. (cf: John 1:29–34) He heard the Father's testimony from heaven saying:

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

John knew he must ***decrease*** and Jesus must ***increase***. (cf: John 3:30) John didn't want his own disciples to start up their own sect of religion – but follow Jesus – having faith that this humble Miracle Worker full of grace was indeed the Messiah, sent by God to save mankind.

So, regardless of whether John's question to Jesus was for himself or for his disciples, John is in prison – and so are you and me. You and I are stuck in our own prison of sin and unbelief – and your only escape is denying yourself, trust in Jesus, and take up your cross and follow Him. (cf: Luke 9:23–24)

The way of the cross is a stark reversal to human reason. It's the hidden way of humility and mercy instead of pride and self-centeredness. It's weakness instead of strength, where victory comes through defeat. The way of the cross is the way of suffering for the sake of Christ, where life comes from dying and rising again.

The way of the cross seems upside-down to you and me. It's where the one sent to prepare the way for the Savior is sent to prison and beheaded for calling out the king's immorality. (cf: Mark 6:14–28) And it's where the One sent to save mankind, gets crucified for bringing God's reign to earth. It doesn't seem rational. It's not our way of doing things. Yet this, fellow redeemed, is why our Gospel lesson this morning is reason to ***rejoice***.

In our Introit and in our epistle text you heard the words:

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

These are St Paul's words written while, he too, is sitting in prison. He, too, knows that he'll be put to death for preaching the Gospel. Yet, he proclaims that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (cf: Philippians 1:21) There's reason to ***rejoice*** – even for the one in prison.

Unlike John the Baptist and St Paul, you're not sitting behind prison bars – but you're still in prison. Perhaps your prison is loneliness – or being bullied and harassed for opposing the evils of the flesh made popular in our culture – or your public confession of Christ. John and St Paul knew what it's like. Possibly your prison is your body – a body broken by the effects of original sin: arthritis, heart disease, memory loss, or cancer. In your prison you suffer attacks from the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh, pushing you to cling to the comfort of your secret private sins from which you stubbornly refuse to turn away from in contrition and repentance.

Your prison can cause you to doubt and despair as you look around at the state of affairs in the world, when you believe your prayers are not answered, when you've become bored with worship, or when you get frustrated with the realities of living as sinner-and-saint among fellow sinner-saints. And right in the midst of all your misery and desperation, you're tempted to cry out to God, saying: *"Is Jesus the One or should I look for another?"* Or, *"Is there really a God out*

there – because – I'm hanging on by a thread and the preacher is telling me there's reason to ***rejoice****, but from where I stand, it looks like I'm wasting my time with religion."*

Take heart my friends. There's reason to ***rejoice*** – even for the one in prison. Jesus gave John's disciples signs for their faith to cling to – signs of which Isaiah had prophesied. (cf: Isaiah 35:1–10) The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised. (cf: Isaiah 35:1–10; Luke 7:22) Jesus' miracles served as signs that God's Kingdom, His reign and rule on earth have come in Christ. It's a reason to sing aloud, ***rejoice***, and exult with all your heart. (cf: Zephaniah 3:14–20) For on Calvary's cross the Lord has taken away the judgments against you and cleared away your enemies. Right here in the Divine Service the Lord is in your midst. You need to fear no evil. (cf: Zephaniah 3:14–15)

The chief of Jesus' signs that He told John's disciples to look for, is the fulfillment of prophesy from Isaiah 61:

> ***"… the poor have good news preached to them."*** (Luke 7:22; cf: Isaiah 61:1)

The poor does not refer to your bank account. It refers to all who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, have come to faith and realize that they are spiritually dead and destitute, and need a Savior. They're sinners who need to be called to repentance and forgiven. Having the Good News preached means – the preaching of the Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners; His blood shed for you and me. Although the Gospel is preached to all, only those who grasp hold of, trust, and believe God's promises of grace and salvation are freed from their prison of spiritual death. As Jesus says:

> ***"… God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*** (John 3:16)

God never promised to remove you from the effects of your temporal prison: namely persecution, temptation, or physical disease. However, He does come to you and all the poor imprisoned in the preaching of the Gospel, strengthening you in every circumstance.

There's reason to ***rejoice*** – even for the one in prison. And the devil knows it. The evil one is doing all he can to stop faithful preaching of the Gospel. John the Baptist was faithful in preparing the way of the Lord, yet was murdered by a corrupt king. (cf: Luke 9:9) Stephen, a faithful follower of Christ, was full of grace and power, and was doing great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8–15) But he was murdered by an angry crowd who rejected his Gospel proclamation. Paul was murdered by the Emperor Nero. They stoned the prophets and murdered the apostles. Faithful preachers today are met with resistance for preaching the truth of the Gospel. And so will you.

Before sending John's disciples on their way, Jesus says:

> ***"… blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*** (Luke 7:23)

Another way of translating it is:

> ***"… blessed is he who is not scandalized by me."*** (Just, Luke 1:1–9:50, Concordia Commentary, 311)

In the original language, this word "***scandalized***" describes a trap with a crooked stick to which the bait is attached. When the stick is touched, it ***springs*** the trap and kills its victim. (cf: Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel, 407) The one who is ***scandalized*** or ***offended*** is the one

who's trapped and led into unbelief. The blessed one is the person who isn't scandalized and offended over the fact that Jesus is the of Messiah. How is one scandalized and offended? By being deceived by the lies of the devil, by not gladly hearing and learning God's Word, by avoiding where the Gospel is rightly proclaimed. By denying that you need Jesus as your Savior.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, ***rejoice*** for Christ Jesus is the coming One. Look for no other. Having secured your place in His eternal Kingdom, Your King comes in humble means to rescue you from prison, leading you in the way of the cross. The Christ gave John's disciples signs for their faith to cling to – and – He has given you greater signs.

- The empty tomb is your sign: Jesus went the way of the cross, suffered and died to free you from the prison of your sin. He descended into hell to declare victory over sin, death, and the devil, and on the third day He was raised from the dead for your justification. (cf: Romans 4:25; 1 Peter 3:19)

- Your Baptism is your sign: At the font, you were buried into Christ's death, bestowing upon you faith and the Holy Spirit. And just as sure as His tomb is empty today, on the Last Day, you too will walk in newness of life, (cf: Romans 6:4–5) when Christ will redeem your body from its prison of pain, weakness, and disease.

- Holy Absolution is your sign: By contrition and repentance, confess your sins and receive Christ's holy absolution, firmly believing that by it your sins are forgiven before God in heaven. Being forgiven, live in your Baptismal grace knowing that in Baptismal waters, your old self died to sin, and allow the Holy Spirit to free you from the bondage of your favorite sins.

- The preaching of the Gospel is your sign: Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ, creating and sustaining faith within you when you're in the prison of anxiety, doubt, despair, and loneliness. (cf: Romans 10:17)

- The Sacrament of the Altar is your sign: Receiving Jesus' very own body and blood while faithfully while clinging to His words: "*Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,"* you are forgiven of sin and preserved in the true faith as you go the way of the cross, proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes again to lift you out of the prison of this life carrying you into the life that is to come.

Rejoice greatly brothers and sisters in Christ:

> ***"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.