

Year A: Third Sunday of Advent
Gaudete Sunday
Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:5-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

I imagine you noticed that today's candle on the Advent wreath is a different color than the others—it's pink. And when we lit it today Macon and I said that it represents joy. That's because today is Gaudete Sunday—the Sunday of Rejoicing—the time when we stop to acknowledge that a joyful event is coming. Immersed as we are in our current Christmas culture in the US, it might seem odd that we have a Sunday dedicated to rejoicing, but it comes from an ancient tradition.

The name Gaudete Sunday comes from a time when all Christian services in the Western Hemisphere were in Latin. It comes from the words that began the service for this day, which was “Gaudete in Domino semper” which means let us rejoice in the Lord always. Gaudete—Let us Rejoice! Since the fifth century, Advent was a penitential season: a season of fasting and preparation for Christmas, in which people were meant to be soberly considering, and repenting of their sins—kind of like Lent still is before Easter. Gaudete Sunday was a mid-season break from the penitential posture, and a time to remember that what we are anticipating is joyous: the birth of the Messiah, and the ushering in of the new reign of God's Kingdom. So today we have a pink candle—sort of a light purple, right? And it is one of the few days in the Church year when we could be using rose colored vestments, as well. Which is something fun to consider... Gaudete Sunday is also a day that can focus on the Virgin Mary, and her role in the coming reign of God's Kingdom. For instance, the alternative to the psalm today, is Mary's “Magnificat” from the Gospel of Luke.

Of course, the propers for today reflect this rejoicing, as well. They're not as apocalyptic as the ones for the rest of the Advent season. The Old Testament lesson, the Psalm and Matthew's Gospel are all tied together with this vision of the new Kingdom, and the arrival of the Messiah. We get the odd, already-and-not-yet feeling that is peculiar to this Advent time of the Church year. Jesus has already come, more than two thousand years ago, yet we await his coming at Christmas every year. In the lessons he tells people that he/the Messiah has arrived, yet liturgically we are still waiting for his birth.

In Matthew's gospel, John the Baptist is in prison, and he sends his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is the promised Messiah. Jesus tells them “yes,” but in this oblique way: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” To John, and to any Jew of his time, hearing these words from Jesus would be to hear the echo of Isaiah's prophecy of what their world would be like when the Messiah comes:

Earlier in Isaiah he says:
Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.

O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!(Is.26:19)

And in today's lesson:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy...
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

John knows he's called to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, and repentance so that people will be ready for him. He's just not sure that Jesus is the one, until he gets this message. Imagine the joy he would have felt in hearing this, even in prison. And that's the thing about joy—it's different from happiness. It's not dependent on our circumstances—like being in prison. Happiness is a result of something done. For instance we might be happy that we received a gift we wanted for our birthday. Or we might be happy because someone complimented something that we did. We might even be happy because of something bad that happened to someone else. And we can be happy while we're overindulging, for instance, but then regret it later. Happiness is triggered by outward events and people, and despite what the Constitution says, just because something makes us happy doesn't necessarily mean it's good for us.

Joy, on the other hand, is not dependent on outward events. Joy is internal, and joy is a result of the Holy Spirit moving in our lives. It is the result of coming to terms with who we are in God. It's being grateful. Joy can come from feeling moved to do for others, it can mean self-sacrifice. It can come from righting injustice. And even if we're depressed, we can experience joy in the knowledge that God loves us. Joy is a byproduct of our spiritual life and our relationship with God.

So today is a day to rejoice in the knowledge of the coming Savior—and a day to remember what gives us joy, and to give thanks. What gives *you* joy? I'm not asking what makes you happy, but what gives you joy? Is it caring for your children, or your parents, or your animals? Is it nature—spending time in God's creation? Is it your work? For me, my work is a huge source of joy. Even though much of my work in the hospital has to do with supporting people who are dealing with trauma, crisis and death, I feel intense joy in serving them. And as I do more ministry at Christ Church, I am finding still more joy in working with you. So today, and in the days to come, think about what gives you joy, and focus on that. Do more of that. Follow God's call to do the joyful thing.

In working on this sermon I was vividly reminded of many times during my work in the hospital that I witnessed other people's joy: births are a big one; healthcare staff giving amazingly compassionate care to people; a surgery resulting in a life saved. One event stands out particularly, though. A few years ago I had been supporting several adult children of a woman in her nineties, as this patient had been slowly declining in our critical care unit. The patient had asked us to do everything that could be done to treat her, but her pneumonia was just not responding. After a couple of weeks, and placing this woman on the ventilator for life support, we had a family meeting to determine what she would want, now that nothing was working. The siblings were conflicted, because their mother had always wanted "everything done," and had

always pulled through when given the chance. They argued the pros and cons: would their mother want to be surgically connected to the ventilator in order to breathe, and have a feeding tube installed in her stomach—and to be housed in a facility far away from them that could deal with all of this life support technology? We talked, and after the doctor left, we prayed, and then talked some more. Eventually the patient's children decided that their mother would not want to be away from everyone she loved, not able to talk, or to eat, and to be hooked up to a machine that breathed for her, until she finally died. "I think we should just keep her comfortable, and let her die with some dignity," one son finally said, "instead of keeping on doing all this stuff to her." The rest of his siblings agreed, and I said "so you're putting it all in God's hands, then."

"Yeah, and this time, we're not going to try to take it back again," the son said. We had some hugs, and some tears, and then made arrangements for their mother's comfort. The whole family, including grandchildren, and some great-grandchildren, were crowded into her room after the life support was removed. She was weak, but aware of everyone, and able to hold their hands, and see them gathered around her.

The next day, to my surprise, I saw that this woman's name was still on my patient census, so I went first thing to see her. One of her daughters was standing outside of the room, and saw me coming. "Oh, Chaplain Melanie" she said joyfully, "you said to put it in God's hands, and look what God DID!" Taking my arm she excitedly led me to her mother's bedside. Not only was her mother breathing on her own, she was sitting up in bed, eating applesauce.

Gaudete, in Domino semper, my friends—let us REJOICE in the Lord Always!
Amen

by Melanie K. Lewis