

Year B
Advent 3
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalms 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I imagine you noticed that today's candle on the Advent wreath is a different color than the others—it's pink. 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. 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, where she says, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit **rejoices** in God my Savior.”

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 John'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 Gospels, Jesus tells people that he/the Messiah has arrived, yet liturgically we are still waiting for his birth.

John the Baptist knows he's called to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, and repentance so that people will be ready for him. He knows that he is **not** the Messiah, and quotes Isaiah's prophecy to those whom the Pharisees sent, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Even this was not completely clear to his listeners though, so he says "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." And imagine the joy that John felt, proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. God called him to exactly this mission—something you'll remember that his mother knew even before his birth. He probably grew up knowing that this was his calling, and joyfully ate the locusts, and lived his ascetic life in the desert.

And that's the thing about joy—it's different from happiness. It's not dependent on our circumstances—like living on locusts in the desert. Happiness is temporary, and is a result of something done. For instance we might be happy that we received a gift we wanted. Or we might be happy because someone complimented something that we did. Someone might even be happy because of a bad thing that happened to someone else. And we can also be happy while we're overindulging in food or drink, for instance, but then regret it later. Happiness is triggered by outward events and people, and despite what our Declaration of Independence 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 can be experiencing gratitude. Joy can also come from feeling moved to do for others. It can mean self-sacrifice. It can come from righting injustice. And even if we're clinically 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. 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.

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

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis
Rector, Christ Church Millwood