

Advent 3A
Matthew 11:2-11
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
December 11, 2017

Rejoice in the Lord

It's the 3rd Sunday in Advent, recognized in many Roman, Anglican, and Lutheran churches as Gaudete Sunday. We lit the rose colored candle on our Advent wreath, a symbol of joy, and shift away a bit from that penitential side of our preparation for Christ's coming. Gaudete is Latin for rejoice, and this day helps remind us to set aside our anxiety, for we can and should always rejoice in the Lord.

All of today's lessons provide words of encouragement, but I find that two of the messages particularly encourage us to turn away from being anxious.

Today's gospel begins with a worried John the Baptist. He's been imprisoned by Herod and he's hearing that Jesus isn't acting as John had expected. Jesus isn't calling anyone out — there's not any kind of "you-brood-of-vipers" name-calling. Nor does Jesus seem to focus on God's wrath. There aren't warnings like John's about the axe waiting at the base of the tree, ready to usher in God's fierce justice.

John gave up everything to proclaim the coming Messiah. His life is on the line, as he waits in Herod's prison. I imagine John may even be wondering if he had made an error and mistakenly pointed towards the wrong guy. John has doubts. Even someone as great as John the Baptist, someone who is more than a prophet — who both proclaims the Messiah and prepares the way — even he can be anxious and have questions.

So John sends his supporters out to ask, "Jesus, are you the one who is coming or should we look for someone else?"

Jesus sends back his answer. Tell John what you have heard and seen — the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news.

Jesus uses the words of the prophet Isaiah to tell John to see the good that is happening, as Jesus replaces despair with joy. Every example Jesus gives demonstrates compassion and healing, rather than judgment and condemnation, for Jesus is redefining Zion's Redeemer, reinterpreting the One who is to come. Jesus, the incarnate One, will be known by his compassion and deeds of healing — not his military prowess or great might. That is not what John expected. It's not what many people expected.

Jesus sees the world differently. Differently than John the Baptist, differently than the disciples. Differently than us. Jesus encourages us to trust in him.

Trust in him — even when things don't look like we expect them to look. Trust, in spite of what the world tells us, for there is real power in love. Acting with compassion, providing healing help, are the work of the kingdom, for that's how you plant and nourish hope where there has been none. Jesus demonstrates a new way, a better way, to act in the world. He's ushering in the coming kingdom, even if it's in ways we humans don't expect.

For God's ways are not our ways. God's plans are beyond what we can even begin to imagine.

It's so easy for us, as humankind, to worry, to doubt, particularly when we're anxious and fearful about the future. Right now, our world is full of anxiety. We seem to be encouraged to keep churning with uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. This week Time Magazine announced the Person of the Year, Donald Trump. And we couldn't miss the byline, that attention grabber: "President of the Divided States of America." The words are meant to be piercing, and the article concludes by describing today's America as a place both "of renewed hope and paralyzing fear." One more worldly reminder that we live in anxious and uncertain times.

But we can trust in God. We can rejoice in God always. For God never gives up on offering the world the chance to become more like the kingdom of heaven. Jesus has shown us, in his own fear-filled and anxious times, that the way to restore the brokenness and hopelessness of the world, is through love.

We're also blessed today with a reading of the Magnificat. Mary is expressing the joy from deep within her soul as she first comes to understand that she had been set apart in a new way, for she is expecting the Holy One, the Messiah. She is able to set aside her worry and anxiety and instead praises God for the blessing of God's love for her, her people, and the world. This poor, humble, unmarried woman-child courageously said yes to God who was turning everything upside down and setting aside all human perceptions of status, value, and order. God acted in the world in God's own way and blessed Mary as the Theotokos, the God-bearer. Mary trusted in God and rejoiced, even when it didn't make any worldly sense, for she lived with hope instilled by God's love.

We too can trust in God. Jesus is our guide and today's gospel message reminds us about what it means to follow Christ and be the church — to share hope, compassion, and healing — to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We can be hope-filled, as we engage in the world, striving to live into Christ's love and compassion by caring for the invisible, the oppressed, the other.

- We live into God's hope when we open ourselves to discerning new possibilities of serving in the broader community. Expect to hear about new opportunities in the upcoming months, as we explore how we can provide transportation for those who need help attending court-ordered appointments, or how we can support DFACS workers as lay-chaplains, or expand our youth involvement with Family Promise.
- We act in hope as we prayerfully support a new team of youth and adults who will build relationships with the children and staff of LAMB Institute, when our Holy Spirit team travels in the new year to encourage God's beloved in Honduras.
- In hope, we continue to open ourselves to God's Word, through Bible study and book studies, through EFM and Christian Education discussions on Faith and Public Life — opportunities that enable us all to better listen and hear one another's perspectives, as we strive to gain insight into God's will for us in both our individual and common lives.
- We live into God's hope as we support one other through life's challenges by praying and listening, by providing a meal or a helping hand or simply by being present to show our love for one another.
- And we live into God's hope by coming faithfully to the Lord's table, to be strengthened for our work in the world and nourished by the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior.

In these last couple of weeks of this Advent season of waiting, I encourage all of us to see beyond the distractions and anxiety of this world. Encourage one another to be aware and be open to God's truth. See the good happening around us, recognize the movement of the Spirit

in and around our lives, and strive to carry God's hope into the world. For as we live into the truth of our Lord's love by treating others with authentic generosity and compassion, we show that we understand just how boundless God's generosity, forgiveness, and love are towards all of us.

Rejoice in the Lord always. And again, I say rejoice. Amen.