

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

On the third Sunday of Advent, after we light the pink candle on the wreath, there are always questions about why there is a pink candle mixed in with the blue or purple, and why we light it today. Here's a little refresher information for all of us: Today is also known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete, which means "rejoice" in Latin, was the first word heard as the ministers entered the Roman Catholic mass. This was important in a time when Advent was observed much a like a mini-Lent, a time of fasting, penitence, and repentance leading up to one of the holiest days in our church year, second only to Easter.

As early as the fifth century, Advent became known as "St. Martin's Lent" because it began on November 13, the day after the feast of St. Martin, and the fast continued until Christmas. In the ninth century, it was shortened to four weeks, and by the twelfth century it was reduced from a fast to simple abstinence. The third Sunday of Advent is basically the mid-point in a season that no longer bears the meaning the early church fathers intended. This is the Sunday when the preacher might ignore the harsh words of John the Baptist and focus instead on the words of the Prophet Zephaniah and the Apostle Paul, both of whom call their listeners to rejoice because we are surrounded by the presence of God.

Joy and rejoicing were my intent for today's sermon, but all week I've struggled with how to speak about joy and rejoicing in a time when both seem to be missing from our collective consciousness, and a time when I'm not sure we really understand what they mean. We no longer practice a theology of fear and unworthiness to be in relationship with God, and I personally am thankful for that, but sometimes I wonder if we've taken it too far. We may have lost the contrast that allows us to truly understand the blessings that come from God's grace and God's gift to us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are taught—and we believe—that all who believe in Christ will enjoy life everlasting. We don't know what it means to be without God's love, because we believe God's love is always with us. Because of that, perhaps we assume more than we should...

An elective class in my last semester of seminary brought that home for me. It was called "The Drama of the Word," and was taught by our New Testament professor and a drama teacher from the University of the South. The "Word" was the Gospel of Luke, which we prepared and rehearsed so that we could speak it from memory, with understanding and compelling meaning. We are not actors, so this was a challenging task. But to this day, I'm drawn to the Magnificat because that was my piece and I adopted it as if Mary's words were my own. It still feels that way. And to this day, I can hear my friend Gary Butterworth speaking the words of John the Baptist that we've heard this morning, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Hearing those words again, and taking them back into the context of John's time invites to wonder if our attitude about salvation is really so different from that of religious folks in his day. Perhaps we all need to be stirred up from time to time. That's certainly what the Baptist did for the folks who heard him.

In his book, *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, John Steinbeck describes attending church in a small Vermont town.¹ He admired the simplicity of the service and the no-nonsense approach of the preacher on the reality of sin. With a "delivery like a pneumatic drill," Steinbeck wrote, the preacher gave a "glorious fire and brimstone sermon" with a graphic description of a "well-stoked, white-hot hell served by technicians of the first order."

¹ Synthesis, Advent 3 Year C, December 12, 2015, 2015, Postscript.

Steinbeck writes that as the sermon progressed, he began to “feel good all over,” reflecting that “for some years now God has been a pal to us ... *“But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble to kick the hell out of me.* He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity.” Steinbeck continues, “I hadn’t been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn’t a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it.” Steinbeck notes that the Vermont preacher “forged a religion designed to last, not predigested obsolescence.”

Steinbeck has hit on something important here. If our sins are only small and mean and nasty and best forgotten; if we are only like naughty children whose parent loves us no matter what we do rather than first-rate sinners whose actions catch God’s attention and lead us to expect some consequences; well if that’s how we see ourselves, how can we appreciate—*truly* appreciate—God’s love and forgiveness? How can we rejoice in it?

“Teacher, what should we do?” the crowds asked John the Baptist. Those were the pre-Jesus crowds, we remember. *We* are witnesses to Jesus’ birth, his ministry of healing and justice and mercy, to his death and ascension and resurrection. We’ve seen and heard about it all, even though we are generation upon generation removed from it. We don’t ask that question anymore, “Teacher, what should we do?” We’ve already heard the answer, and though we don’t always respond in the way we are called to respond, we know that we should. We also know that when we do respond in the way God intends, the purpose of our lives becomes clear.

Both John the Baptist and John Steinbeck’s preacher from Vermont speak to a sense of longing that is carried deep within our souls, a longing to know that who we are and what we do matters to the God who created us. In some ways we’re like kids whose parents give them no guidelines and no consequences. We want to know that God loves us no matter what we do. But we also long to know that God cares whether or not we sin, because God loves us. That’s what we all long for—that deep abiding love that values us, cherishes us, desires for us only that which is good: the very best love we could ever imagine. That knowledge is heart knowledge and rejoicing begins in our hearts!

Yesterday at our annual Angel Tree party, I watched the faces of the children who were honorees for the afternoon. The younger ones don’t really understand what it’s all about. Their joy is innocent. All they really know is that there’s a party and games and fun and lots of sugar. But in the faces of the older children, who do understand why they are there, and in the faces of the caregivers who have found themselves in a position they never imagined, there is a hesitancy, I think, an uncertainty about what will come next and how their lives will be affected. That’s why sharing the Christmas story and how it came out of God’s love for us is so important, not just for those who attend our party but for everyone who lives in this world. As Christians, we are assured that God will always be with us. That is why God sent Jesus to us, and why we are called to share him with folks who may not even know they are seeking him, and not just during Advent and Christmas, but in every time of the year. When we share him with joy and hope and peace, our message becomes compelling, convincing, and inviting!

Paul’s letter to the Philippians was written by a man who obviously cared deeply for the people to whom he was writing. It is a letter of encouragement to a community that perhaps like ours was distracted by the world and its craziness. “Rejoice in the Lord always ... Let your gentleness be known to everyone ... Do not worry ... let your requests be made known to God ... The Lord is near!” Paul’s words are just as important to us today, so let’s take heed of them. Rejoice! If you’re blessed and you know it, let the world see that. And most of all, let the world see in you the peace of God, that inexplicable harmony of body, mind, and spirit, that will guard your hearts and your minds in the love of Christ. *Amen.*