



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 15, 2019
The Third Sunday of Advent

Festal Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, and Matthew 11:2-11
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Gaudete Sunday

Let us pray:

“Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. The Lord is at hand...And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.”

There has been a refrain in my life, lately, that comes when someone discovers that I am a relatively new father, or after I tell them a story about my little child. This happens probably twenty times a month: The conversation stops, and with bittersweet solemnity, I’m given a command: “Enjoy it!” This is a kind gesture, but a little unsettling. There is something implied, but unsaid, in that charge, like the tolling of a bell for me, and that is the unspoken ending: “Enjoy it,” or in Latin, “Gaudete,” while you can!” For one day your child will be grown, and there will be far, far less to enjoy!” And so, every time this happens, I try to take this charge seriously, to take it as an opportunity to wake up to the wonder of things, while they last. But, given all that is involved with little Sam, I can only be joyful for so long before having to take a nap!

Today, Gaudete (GOW-day-tay) Sunday, a day of rejoicing, is set within our Advent season of somber reflection, as we prepare for our Lord’s coming, both in Bethlehem and at the end of this age. Today, a new bright color flashes in the dark purple. The pink light and the pink cloth: a heavenly signal, like an alert on your phone, perhaps, except in this case it is an alert in your heart. What is this alert? A reminder to be joyful. It’s a pink, holy text message from the Apostle Paul: “Rejoice! And again, I say to you, rejoice!” This seems less a reminder, and more a command. Can one really be commanded into being joyful? In these darkening days, in the hectic flurry, in the renewed grief that can sometimes come this time of year, in all the variety of ways we must keep our eyes on the ball, is this fair?

Well, if you think about it, most festival days happen like clockwork, irrespective of circumstances. Your birthday comes on its day, like some command out of time, no matter how things are going for you. Christmas comes for all of us at its appointed time no matter how things are going.

This gets closer to the kind of joy we are celebrating today. We are not rejoicing in things that are passing away, like a child’s youth. We are rejoicing in what has already occurred AND what has already been secured in the time to come. We are rejoicing in the timeless and the eternal activity of God.

Now Paul’s command includes the insight that there is joy comes first, something to which we must say, “Yes.” And then, as if in sequence, the “peace that passes all understanding” can make a home in our lives.

The implication is that this sort of joy doesn't rely on things being settled, or stable, or safe. He's telling us that this joy can take root in any time, even a peace-less time, and then that joy is the setting for a deeper peace to grow and bear fruit.

Our living hope is for God's eternal joy to make its way to us no matter how things are going. It's not a joy blind to circumstance, but a kind of rugged joy, one that can be a light that shines in the darkness, one that can be the pink light that glimmers in the purple waves. It is akin to a prophet's joy springing out of a prophet's hope for what is to come, for what God *will* do in a future that is relatively hidden to us. We've just read of a vivid example of that kind of rugged joy in the life of John the Baptist, a joy that can take root even in his own dungeon.

If you don't know much about the mascot of Advent, this John the Baptist, he was one, because of his father, Zechariah, who could have been a High Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem. Yet, he chose a different path, taking on the clothes of a prophet, heading out into the profane wilderness, to the River Jordan. He preached about how crooked people were, how far they had strayed from God. He really dug in on this, speaking of some as a brood of vipers. He spoke of a divine axe that was waiting to chop them down like rotten trees.

But instead of demanding that they be cast out, or destroyed, he prepared a path for these sinners, a path to freedom that anyone could take. He didn't need a grand temple, he just needed a river. He called people to repent, to turn back to God, to wash and be made clean for a new life. And, despite his rough words, perhaps because of them, people came by the thousands. The sheep and the goats, all sorts, were declared clean and righteous. And there were no scapegoats here. John's ministry was not one of righteous casting out, but it was one of inviting all sorts of people to the water, a latter day Red Sea where people emerged to discover both God's freedom and God's mercy.

John the Baptist was on an upright path, but he also preached about a baptism that was better than his, one with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John had had a breakthrough, but he somehow knew that his ministry was only the beginning, that it pointed to something on the horizon yet to come.

Jesus addresses this in the poignant encounter we read today, a conversation through disciples, while John sits in prison, and Jesus walks free (for now). John asks him a hopeful question from that dungeon: "Are you the One? Are you the One I've been telling people about, the one who baptizes with fire?" And Jesus responds with a lyrical passage from the classic prophet, Isaiah:

"Look at what is happening, John! The blind receives their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them."

Jesus is speaking of all of the blessings and transformations that were happening in his ministry, not just in a temple, or by a river, but everywhere that he could walk, whether it be in Galilee or even beyond the Promised Land. Jesus didn't need people to come to him, he came to them, finding his way in and among, and even touching, those thought suspect, unclean, or even evil. Those who were declared broken and dead, he declared whole and alive. Rather than beginning with God's judgement and moving to God's mercy, like John, it seems that Jesus somehow had the strength to love and heal all sorts of people with an unprecedented immediacy. In Him, judgement, mercy, and love were a single potent act. He lived this out again and again, and he taught others how to live it too, and like wildfire, just like the fire John had prophesied, his Spirit spread throughout the globe, deathless and free.

I trust that Jesus' response to John in his prison would have connected the dots for him. And that John's hope would have been answered by Jesus' bold proclamation, leading him to a joy that could take root even in his dungeon: the joy of fulfillment of all that had gone before, the joy in knowing that all the good things of God that he had found, if only in part, would find their completion. In a way, it had already happened.

This is the ultimate joy that we make space for this Gaudete Sunday, no matter the weather, a joyful response to something that has yet to happen, at least, has yet to happen completely in our lives. For the light that has shone from that humble manger will emerge on the horizon brighter than every sun, making all things new. It may seem peculiar, for an observer, that today we rejoice for the past (as if it were to come on December 25th), and that today we rejoice for the ultimate future (as if it had already happened). But this is how we try to gather the full scope of God's great work, this is how we finite creatures do our best to claim all of it, a glimpse of eternity, so that God's timeless joy can make its way into every now. We rejoice today to claim God's peace, so that, as the prophet wrote, even our "wilderness and (our) solitary places shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose."