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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2023
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28
Joy

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

There is a certain person in this congregation. I'm not going to reveal his identity, but he likes to play stump the newbie pastor and ask me questions sometimes. About the Bible, about theology, etc. I look forward to these questions because they keep me on my toes. Well, two weeks ago he asked me this. Why is there *one* pink candle in the Advent wreath? What does it symbolize?

Now, I knew it had something to do with Jesus. (That's usually a pretty safe answer to any theological question anyway – something to do with Jesus!) But I had to look it up to find out more details. And I'm glad I did, because it led me to my sermon topic for this Third Sunday of Advent – joy. Or more specifically, how to find joy even when you don't feel like rejoicing.

Advent is originally a penitential season. I am sure you knew that. There is probably at least one person you know who likes to remind everybody that no matter what songs are already blasting over the airwaves, it's not Christmas yet! In church tradition, in both the western and eastern churches, Advent is something like a mini-Lent. It is a time of fasting and abstinence ahead of a great festival; it is a time to prepare your heart and soul for the coming of Jesus. That is why the candles in the Advent wreath are purple. The color violet is the liturgical color signifying a time of prayer, penitence, and sacrifice. It's the same color we use during Lent, which we know is a somber season of self-reflection.

It's almost hard to fathom when the world around us seems to start celebrating the Christmas season the second the sun goes down on Thanksgiving. The town lights go up, the tree sellers mobilize, the merchandise glitters in the windows, that one Mariah Carey song starts playing nonstop. But in Christ's church, it's Advent, and it's rather a different vibe. We get Scripture lessons about penitence and about staying spiritually awake so that we will not be unprepared for the coming of our Lord.

But today, on the Third Sunday of Advent, we light a rose-colored candle. (It's rose, not pink, if you're a liturgical purist.) That's because it's Gaudete Sunday, and rose is the color of joy. Gaudete is Latin for "rejoice!" Perhaps you noticed

in our epistle lesson today that Saint Paul commands us to “rejoice always.” It’s not a suggestion; it’s an order! Gaudete is also in the imperative; the Church got the message and designated this Sunday as a day to rejoice in the Lord and take a break from the penitential solemnity of Advent. The joyful exuberance of the lesson from Isaiah reiterates this theme. Jesus is coming, and that is good news for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the prisoners, and all who mourn. The Messiah is coming, and He is going to set the whole creation to right, so how could we be anything but joyful when we think about the reason for this season of Advent and the Christmas celebration that awaits us?

Except, of course, that it can be awfully hard sometimes to be joyful. And no matter how many singers are crooning about how it’s the “most wonderful time of the year,” it can be especially hard to feel joy during the holiday season. For every feel-good made for TV movie about Christmas and every sentimental commercial extolling the holiday spirit, there’s an article about the holiday blues or a social media post reminding us that for some people, this is actually the hardest time of year. Even so, it’s difficult for many of us to admit it. Even in the church. We are bombarded with messages about how we should be merry and bright, so how can we admit that we might be sad, anxious, overwhelmed, bitter, or disillusioned? And to top it all off, here comes a rose-colored candle to rub it in, telling us to get busy rejoicing.

That is why I find the imagery of the Advent wreath so striking. I was so moved when I started reading more about the symbolism of the four candles that I needed to share it in this sermon. Advent is a season of paradox. It is a season of light in the midst of darkness, presence in the midst of absence, fulfillment in the midst of longing. So what better image of the paradoxical nature of Advent than a rose-colored light shining in the midst of three solemn, purple lights? Because the world is indeed a place full, sometimes, of sorrow, heartbreak, and tragedy, and the Church never flinches from acknowledging that. The Church never offers false cheer. It does not leave us with platitudes or ask us to paper over ugliness with tinsel and bows. The Church observes Lent and Advent because the Church is more honest and realistic than the secular world will ever be.

So what then do we make of the imperative, rejoice? How is it that Paul can command Christians to “rejoice always, pray constantly, [and] give thanks in all circumstances?” Doesn’t he know how hard it is for some people, even for faithful Christians? Doesn’t he know that this time of year especially is painful for many people, and they can’t even muster the strength to get out of bed sometimes, much less jump for joy?

The time of year that the world calls the holiday season is a time when many families are absolutely crushed by financial burdens. Far too many people around the country and around the globe don't have enough money for food, for housing, for medical expenses, etc., much less for presents to go under the tree. How do you rejoice when you don't know where your next meal is coming from?

The holiday season is also a time when many people are overwhelmed by grief over the loss of loved ones or the stress of strained relationships. An empty place at the table is hard any time, but this time of year it can seem unbearable. And while some people are enjoying extra time with family and friends, just as many people find themselves all alone. Loneliness is an epidemic in America, and during the holidays it only intensifies. How do you rejoice when you feel isolated and bereft?

As if loneliness, poverty, grief, and family discord weren't enough, bad news continues to pour in from every corner of the globe. War. Terrorism. Disaster. Social breakdown. Addiction. Factionalism. The decline of once revered institutions. The erosion of faith and morals at every level of society.

The devil still prowls. Maybe in his prowling he has come a little personally close for comfort.

So how do you rejoice in such circumstances? What if, no matter how hard you try, you cannot will yourself to be joyful? What are you going to do when it's Gaudete Sunday and you hear Saint Paul commanding you to rejoice and give thanks in every situation without exception, but you cannot muster the right feelings and you cannot break out of your funk? It might seem downright callous for Paul to be harping on the need to be joyful when circumstances seem anything but.

It has been observed many times that we live in a therapeutic age. That's not always a bad thing. We are, as a people, more in touch with our feelings than ever. We can talk about things like depression and anxiety and other mental health woes with an openness that might have amazed our forebears.

But sometimes we emphasize the importance of feelings a little too much. And this is especially dangerous when it comes to the joy that is at the heart of Christian life, the joy that is symbolized by that rose-colored candle. Emotions often seem to come to us from the outside, dependent on circumstances beyond our control. If we are sick, disappointed, stressed, or sad, that will certainly have an effect on our mood. It will certainly have an effect on our ability to *feel* joyful.

But we have to distinguish the joy that comes in Christ from these passing emotional states. That's why rejoice is in the form of a command.

And that is why I would like to suggest that in order to better obey this command, we should look for inspiration from the ultimate guide to Advent joy. I am not talking about Mary, or Joseph. I am not talking about the angel Gabriel, or the shepherds or the wise men. Their time is coming, but it's still Advent!

This guide to Advent joy might seem like an unlikely candidate for the job. He was not known for being jolly, or tenderhearted, or sensitive to people's feelings. He never sugarcoated anything. He would call out sin wherever he saw it, no matter how eminent or powerful the sinner. He didn't flinch at condemning a king, so you can be sure he wouldn't hesitate about denouncing you or me. He was not indulgent in his personal habits; his diet was pretty spare and his lifestyle austere. He favored wild bugs over rich cuts of meat. He was not what you would call charming, and if you got on his bad side, he might call you a viper. He was a holy man and a preacher, but most of his preaching came in the form of dire warnings to repent before it was too late.

I am speaking, of course, of John the Baptist!

Last Sunday, Pastor Greg gave us quite a vivid description of this severe man. I have come to think of him as the ultimate ambassador of Advent joy. Now, obviously, he was just a baby himself at the first Christmas, and he doesn't get to be in the manger scenes or play a role in the other imagery that we associate with Christmas.

But his prophesying and his story are a hugely important part of our preparations for Christmas. John the Baptist is here to give us a reality check before the celebrations begin. I am pretty sure that if John the Baptist were with us today, he would walk over to the radio and turn off the Christmas music and then he might go pull the plug on the Christmas tree lights, and then he would lecture us that it's still Advent and we are still supposed to be fasting and repenting.

But I think he would also take a page from Saint Paul and tell us to rejoice.

John's great mission in life was to point us to the Source of joy. He came, as our Gospel text for today says, "to bear witness to the light." He was the great forerunner whose role it was to prepare the people to meet the Messiah. How

do you prepare anybody for such a momentous, glorious moment? For a moment that should be one of pure joy and utter ecstasy?

You do it by helping people to eliminate false and counterfeit joys from their life. You do it by preaching repentance because sin doesn't make you happy, not really. That's just a trick of the devil and you shouldn't trust the devil, no matter how good it feels sometimes to give in. You do it by helping people shed their delusions about the state of the world and eliminating any sense of false comfort, so they will be ready to find true comfort in their Savior. You say, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord."

John the Baptist is probably not going to tell you what you want to hear. If you were to complain to him that you have a touch of the holiday blues, I'm afraid he wouldn't be very sympathetic. I would hazard a guess that he wasn't very good at talking about feelings, period.

But he would be able to point you in the right direction. He would send you to the One who *is* able to comfort, to bring peace, to save you from your sins and redeem the world He created. He would send you to Jesus, who will wipe away your tears, bear your sorrows, walk with you in the darkness and carry you into the light.

John himself met a difficult end, imprisoned and then beheaded for speaking the truth. But I promise you that he died rejoicing, because he had seen for himself the Messiah, because he had come to know the Lord and knew that his mission as forerunner had come to fruition.

If John can rejoice in adverse circumstances, so can we.

We can do this by emulating John and embracing Jesus. Circumstances change, emotions fluctuate, good fortunes come and go. But Jesus is Lord yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus is as constant as we are inconstant. People will let us down; we will let ourselves down; Jesus will never let us down.

That is reason to rejoice!

How can we make a conscious effort to put Gaudete Sunday into practice? How can we be more mindful about taking Saint Paul at his word and rejoicing always?

Pray.

Pray as often as possible. When prayer is the center of your life, other things will fall into place.

Practice gratitude. Give thanks to God for every blessing in your life, even the tiniest ones.

Seek out the Lord. Seek Him in the Scriptures. Seek Him in the Eucharist. Seek Him in the face of your brothers and sisters. You will be amazed at all the places you can find Him when you are on the lookout.

Obey the commandments. "Hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil."

None of these actions require you to manufacture false feelings of joy if that is not what is in your heart at this time. But they will lead you to the Source of joy everlasting, to Jesus Christ. With Paul and John the Baptist and all the saints, we can rejoice in Him, to Whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.