

Matthew 11:2-15

“*Rejoice in the Lord always!*” is how our Introit begins and ends; “*Again I will say, rejoice!*” And so today, the Third Sunday in Advent, we light the rose-colored candle. This signifies the brighter hope of believers as we await the coming of our Lord.

The time of Advent can be dark and foreboding. For us, the days are getting shorter, and the nights longer; and both are becoming colder. We see a light off in the distance - the light of Christmas - but we’re only halfway through Advent. We do not light the white candle until two weeks from now. And so the theme for this Sunday urges us on and encourages us. “Rejoice!” is the word of the day. “*Rejoice in the Lord always!*”

I wonder how much John the Baptist felt like rejoicing as he rotted away in his prison cell. He had been sitting in this hard, cold dungeon for an entire year. For him, there was no light at all; only darkness. He was God’s prophet. More than that, he was the messenger prophesied of old. John came to prepare the way for the Christ. But what was Christ doing to prepare the way out of prison for John? “*Is there another one we should be looking for?*” John’s disciples asked Jesus. “Is there someone else, and not you, who will make things right; who will stop evil from winning the day, and bring about justice for John in prison, and for all of God’s people?”

This question is one which is not all that foreign to us. We’re told to rejoice. But if God wants us to be full of joy, why does He send so many joy-killers into our life? We all have them; little ones, and big ones. And so, “*Rejoice in the Lord always,*” becomes more of a “Rejoice in the Lord sometimes.” And when life takes a terrible turn, it even becomes, “Rejoice in the Lord never.” But we have Jesus. We belong to Him. We’re God’s people. Yet rather than rejoicing in this, we feel guilty; guilty for not feeling very joyful when we’re told to “*Rejoice in the Lord always!*”

How is it possible to rejoice when sitting in a dark dungeon? How is it possible to rejoice when cancer strikes us or a loved one? How is it possible to rejoice when there isn’t enough money to pay the bills? The light of hope can seem so far away; so distant, that we begin to doubt whether it will ever come. And we begin to say the words, “Rejoice in the Lord always,” but our heart isn’t in them.

Jesus’ answer to the disciples of John is the same answer we need in life today. “*Go and tell John,*” He said, “*what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and the lame walk. Lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.*” All of these were taking place in the present day. The light was not far off in the distant future. The light was already there. All John could see was darkness in his prison cell; but there was light. And for John to see the light, he needed to close his eyes to the evil and injustice in his life, and in faith listen to the deeds Jesus was doing.

Friends, the light has come. John could not see it, and we don’t always see it. But the light which brings joy and hope is not far away. The light is here now, and is here for you. Jesus is the light. Jesus is joy and hope. If Jesus was far away, we would have reason to be joyless. But your Light

has come. Even as we wait to see Jesus with our eyes, we see Him in faith. We behold His gracious deeds done for us.

Are you baptized? Then you are the dead who have been raised up. Then Jesus is not far off in the distance; He has come to you in these waters to bring you out of the darkness of unbelief into His Kingdom of Grace.

Did you hear the words of Absolution? Then you are the poor who have the Good News preached to them. These words are not dead and lifeless. These words are full of life for you. Jesus declares you His forgiven one. Whatever your problems in life right now, your sinfulness is not one of them. Your sins are forgiven. Whatever darkness has come into your life right now, it is temporary. The glorious light of heaven awaits you.

Do you see the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood on the altar for you? Then you are the blind who have received sight. Here is light for your darkness. Here is hope for you, and peace and joy, for here is Christ in bread and wine.

Jesus is the "coming one;" the one who came, who will come, and the one who comes now to you. There is no one else. Jesus is the Holy One of God. He is the one who hung on a cross for you. He entered into your darkness to bring you light. He felt the pain of eternal death to give you the hope of life now and forever.

There is a beautiful banner hanging from the balcony behind you. And how appropriate - "Joy" is what the banner says. You do not see the banner when coming into church. You come in and sit down, and joy may not be in your heart. But He who gives joy is here. As you sit, listen, sing, pray, commune, your Lord is at work within you. He is filling you with His peace through sins forgiven. He is giving you hope as your Light and Life. And He is allowing you to rejoice, not just on the good days, but to "*Rejoice in the Lord always!*" And so how absolutely fitting it is that when the Divine Service is ended, you rise from worship and see the word "Joy" before your eyes. No darkness can take your joy from you, for Jesus is your joy, and Jesus, who is here for you, now leaves with you and in you. Amen.