

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today is the third Sunday of Advent and we find ourselves, liturgically deep into the season of Advent. The wreath is getting brighter with each week and the candles are sequentially getting smaller to mark our progress through the season.

The first lit candle represented hope and last week the candle represented peace. Today we light the third candle to represent joy. This is a Sunday that is usually marked with a pink candle on the Advent wreath as well as pink vestments and paraments because pink is the liturgical color of joy and it is our liturgical color for today. *Gaudete* is a Latin word that means rejoice, so today is known as *Gaudete Sunday*. So, we like St. Paul in his letter to the people of Philippi say:

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.  
(Philippians 4:4-6)

So, we rejoice in the Lord on this *Gaudete* Sunday. And as we look around us as the season is getting brighter, the Lord's birth getting nearer, and our anticipation growing toward the birth of our Lord, the birth of salvation for us all, what then is our expected joy or what is joy for us as a church...or as individual members of that body we call the church? How do we understand joy and what then is our expectations of that joy?

We may understand joy as a feeling of great pleasure and happiness...we may understand joy as the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or the prospect of possessing what we desire. Joy may be for us a delight in the external things around us...things such as, our family, our friends. Joy for us as a church may be a full house and a balanced budget...maybe a roof that doesn't leak and drains that do what they are supposed to do. Maybe joy is a moment of solitude to remember those loved ones who are not here this year or maybe even the very next breath we take? Big or small, joy comes in so many different ways and can be as individual as our toothbrush.

We know and we expect joy to be that feeling of great pleasure and happiness. Of course, We then take great joy in the salvation we share in the birth of the Christ child that we anticipate through the faith that has been poured out upon us by the Holy Spirit. But as we reflect and discern the "joy" of the season and in particular, the joy of this marked Sunday of Joy, what joy do we expect to experience? What joy do we expect in the outcome of Advent...moreover, what do we expect of God during Advent? Perhaps our expectations cause us to ask, why did they decided to label these Sundays in Advent with titles such as, hope, peace, joy, and love? Don't we expect the appointed Gospel lessons then to easily and to simply reflect these titles.

The first Sunday of every Advent is assigned a text that is known as the "temple discourse" from the teachings of Jesus. Jesus tells us in this discourse of the destruction of the temple on the day we light the candle for hope...is this the story we would expect to hear when we envision hope? Would we expect God to destroy just to evoke hope in us? The second Sunday always takes us into the wilderness to a peculiar character named John the Baptist calling us a brood of vipers and threatening us with the wrath that is to come. On the day we light the candle of peace...do we expect this peace to be the wrath of the unquenchable fire? What peace do we expect from *this*

story? Do you think John expected to be locked up in prison awaiting his death for pointing out the king's adulterous and somewhat incestuous marriage to his sister-in-law Herodias? Maybe like John our expectations are being dashed and we are beginning to wonder what kind of Messiah is this and should we be considering another one because this one we are hearing about is not really meeting our expectations?

Looking ahead then to the birth of Christ, would we expect this baby whose birth we anticipate to be offensive? After all, he will be called the Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, or the Lamb of God...what then do we expect as we listen to these passages and the titles of the Sundays leading up to the birth of our Emmanuel? Would we expect God or this baby to be offensive? I ask this because in our Gospel lesson we hear Jesus answering John's question amidst his doubt,

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

We then hear Jesus' answer to John:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

What offense could we possibly take in what Jesus is doing? I guess Jesus' response to John would be what we would expect of Jesus, but then there is this comment from Jesus that might shatter our expectations:

<sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

We expect all these good deeds from Jesus and take great joy in them; however, the ministry of Jesus was offensive and has a long record of repeated rejection and offense. But if we are confused or even offended by this statement from Jesus about those who are offended...it must mean then that we, like John, have a firm understanding of who this Messiah ought to be and how this Messiah ought to function. But do we truly know what this Messiah looks like, acts like, and would we even recognize this Messiah's ministry?

Yes, we all have our expectations of this Messiah...but if we look closely to those expectations, we may find ourselves imprisoned in our own expectations and opinions about *our* Messiah and just like John today in our Gospel lesson, we may find ourselves asking:

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Have we grown weary and somewhat doubtful in the expectations of our vision of the Messiah? When we look at our own reality, do we feel that our life is not what we think it ought to be...have we expected more because we go to church and confess a faith in Jesus Christ? Do we feel imprisoned in our "stuff" and do we sit in doubt because we feel there ought to be more because of our faith?

Like John in our Gospel today, do we expect that our faith ought to be turning the world up-side-down and confronting the unjust systems and the power brokers head-on? Has our faith become like everything else around us today...instantaneously-self-gratifyingly-fulfilling. Perhaps like John we expect the wrath to come to be on those vipers out there and we want vindication right NOW.

Interestingly, if we look at our expectations formed by what we first hear about John, perhaps we see someone who is fiercely faithful, but at the same time, someone who is very confident and even cocky, arrogant to the point of obnoxious, and even rude. But what else would we expect from someone who is proclaiming such an important message, someone who is living in the wilderness, dressed in camel hair, and eating bugs. We know John is sent by God, would we expect him to be imprisoned? Does he himself expect to be imprisoned? Nonetheless, John sits in prison... our expectations may be dashed because we now see a confused and doubtful servant of God who sits in a situation that he himself may not have expected.

In our expectations then we ought to look closely to the ministry of Jesus and see that this ministry of Jesus began turning the world around with one person and one illness at a time...it didn't happen all at once, in one big display of power or one big huge war. Instead, we quickly see that the *blind* receive their sight, the *lame* walk, the *lepers* are cleansed, the *deaf* hear, the *dead* are raised, and the *poor* have good news brought to them...and all these people that Jesus cares for are those who are on the fringe of the culture...they are the outcasts and the social rejects...you know who they are, those we despise out there...those who we expect are not worthy of the blessings they receive from Jesus.

We might expect God through Jesus Christ to act with brute strength and to launch a movement that wields authority that will claim our culture and even our government in the name of Jesus and fulfill all the expectations of our faith in the power of Jesus...but looking ahead, we will find our expectations are dashed because instead of the power and might we expect, we get a vulnerable baby born to immigrants in a very risky circumstance, searching for a place of rest...a shelter from the elements to give birth to the Son of God.

And then we see this baby grow to minister to those who are on the fringe of society, minister to those for whom no one prays...Jesus ministers those out there. And then we see this Messiah show us the ultimate display power in the crucifixion. Perhaps this is not the Messiah we expected but this is the Messiah we are truly blessed with. We might expect a God who gives us perfect moral superiority and vindication, but we get a Messiah who tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who oppress us.<sup>1</sup> Lord only knows what we expect the wrath to come to be, but we get a Messiah who gives his very life to set us free from the wrath we deserve because of our of sin and death.

So today, as we look past our expectations that imprison our faith, I say as Isaiah says to us today, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God," maybe not what we expected, our Messiah, our Emmanuel to be...but his very presence is here in this Word and in this Holy Meal. This Holy Meal may not be the "meal" we understand and expect a meal to be, but in this meal our Messiah, our Emmanuel is drawing us in...and saying to us...take and eat, this is my body, drink this all of you, this is my blood shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sin...DO THIS in remembrance of me.

Jesus is asking us to look past our expectations and notice, to hear and to see the grace and mercy he brings into the world...NOT with power and might but with love and humility. Notice also that

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<sup>1</sup> Skinner, Matthew L. *Voices of Advent, The Bible's Insights For A Season Of Hope*. Nashville: Abington Press, 2025, "The Voice of John the Baptist, pages 48-49.

the grace and mercy given to us happens amidst our expectations and all that is going on in our hearts and our lives, and in the world around us. His presence may not be what we expect... or what we think it ought to be...his presence may be somewhat ambiguous, and it might even seem as though He doesn't even care, but look closer, look more intently Christ is with us, his mercy and his love for us is with us...and remains with us to the end of the ages.

So, again I say rejoice...Put aside our expectations and rejoice in the Lord on this *Gaudete Sunday*. Listen and hear the hope, the peace, the Joy, and the love that is the Good News of Jesus Christ proclaimed in this Word...look beyond our assumptions and expectations and look closely, see, recognize, and take comfort in the bread and wine of this Holy Meal that is our Lord Jesus Christ...in them our Lord is giving strength to our expectant, but weak hearts and He is making firm our feeble faith. So, I say to you all this day of great joy, "Be strong, do not fear! Here in this Holy Word and in this Holy Meal is our God giving to us all, mercy and life, and hope, peace, and joy.

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