

“Rejoice! Christ is Near”
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Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
Advent 3, December 16, 2018
Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, known as Gaudete Sunday. Originally, Advent was a penitential season, like Lent – forty days of fasting in preparation for the feast of Christmas. In the 9th century or thereabouts, Advent became four weeks, and the 3rd Sunday of Advent, like the 4th Sunday of Lent became a day for relaxing the restrictions imposed during the season. Organ music and flowers were allowed that day, and the emphasis was on the nearness of Jesus’ coming.

Gaudete is Latin for Rejoice and is the first word in the Introit of the Latin Mass for this day.

We hear the word “rejoice” in both of our readings from the Hebrew scriptures this morning. Zephaniah calls the people of Israel to rejoice because the Lord has taken away the judgments against them. The canticle from Isaiah describes the rejoicing that accompanies drawing water from the springs of salvation.

And in Philippians we hear, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.”
Do not worry about anything. Rejoice, for the Lord is near.
Comforting words in a dark time.

And yet, on this Sunday, our Gospel reading isn’t very joyful. It *inspires* worry rather than alleviating it. It’s kind of scary. If we translate John the Baptist’s sermon into our context, we might hear something like this, “You spawn of snakes! Who warned you to get yourselves to church today? Don’t think that’s going to save you. You need to change your behavior. And don’t give me that bull about being from a Christian family. Just because you call yourself a Christian doesn’t mean you’re actually walking the talk. If you don’t start doing better, you’re going down, and I’m talking into the fiery furnace!”

Aren’t you glad I’m preaching today and not John the Baptist?

But seriously, we have this juxtaposition between Gaudete Sunday urging us to rejoice because the Lord is near and John the Baptist shouting at us to repent, and to show that repentance in how we’re living, or else we’re going to be cut down with axes and tossed into the fire. Which one is it?

Like many things in our faith, I think it’s both/and not either/or.
Rejoice *and* repent. Or better yet, repent and then rejoice.

John's message is good news, even though it might sound a bit like the hellfire and brimstone that we'd just as soon avoid. No one wants to think about sin, especially at this time of year, but as our collect says, we are sorely hindered by our sins.

The call to repent is good news. It means we can change our minds. We're given do-overs where we can choose to do things differently. We get the opportunity to stop bearing bad fruit and to start bearing good fruit.

When we find ourselves walking down the road of poor decisions, we turn, change directions, and head back on the road that leads to bearing good fruit, fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

When the crowds ask John what they need to do in order to repent, he essentially says, "share, be fair, and don't bully."¹ Share what you have, be fair with the taxes you're collecting, don't use fear or lies to bully others. Be content with what you have. It is enough.

Note that he doesn't say join me out here in the desert or go and sell everything you own or defy Rome and refuse to pay your taxes. He doesn't tell them that they need to be heroes and die for the cause. He also doesn't tell them they need to sit around feeling guilty.

He calls them to bear good fruit in their daily lives, at home, at work, with their neighbors, in their community. He addresses their specific occupations, their specific contexts, and gives instructions appropriate to each one. Instructions for what they need to do in order to be ready for Jesus, the one who would come among them with a very different kind of baptism.

If John were here this morning, what might he instruct each of you to do specifically in order to bear fruit worthy of repentance?

What might we as the people of God at Bruton Parish Church need to do? If Jesus were to come again on the 25th of December in the flesh, and we were to meet him face to face, would we be ready?

Listen for a moment. Quiet your thoughts and your breath and listen for what you need to do to prepare for Jesus coming.

Let go of all that needs to be done for the holiday.
Let go of the shopping list, the grocery list, the to-do list.
Let go of the worry, the anxiety, and the fear.

¹ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/12/advent-3-c-beyond-scolding/>.

Listen for what you need to do *not* to get ready for Christmas, but what you need to do to get ready for Christ.

Maybe you're being called to reconcile with someone, to offer or ask for forgiveness.

Maybe you're being called to share or to give out of your abundance.

Maybe you're being called to trust that God will provide what you need.

Maybe you're being called to be honest with yourself or someone else.

Maybe you're being called to slow down and pay attention.

Maybe you're being called to get up and act.

Maybe you're being called to lay down a burden and to accept that you can't do it by yourself.

Maybe you're being called to recognize that what you have and who you are is enough.

Whatever God is calling each of us to do to prepare in this final week of Advent, my prayer is that we will stop and listen. That we will take a look at the fruit we are bringing into the world. That we will strive to bear good fruit and when we don't, that we will repent and turn back to God.

Christ is coming. He loves us so much that he's willing to be among us, even when we bear rotten fruit. Turn to him, turn to him and repent.

John couldn't save us from our sin, but Jesus could. And did. And that, dear ones is good news indeed.

Rejoice in the Lord; again I will say rejoice. Jesus is coming. Christ is near.