

Advent 3 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

You all may have noticed when you walked into the church that our pink candle is lit. And in case you were wondering, no, that particular candle is not pink because we ran out of blue candles and had to improvise. That pink candle has meaning. It signifies the third Sunday of Advent, which we call Gaudete Sunday—literally Rejoice Sunday. It's the Sunday when we intentionally, in the midst of our preparations for the day of our Lord's coming, rejoice—where we take the time to remember to be joyful, even as we look forward to Christ's long-anticipated arrival.

Yet you also may have noticed that not all of our readings for today necessarily seem so joyful. The Gospel reading starts out by telling us that John the Baptist is in prison. He has finally been apprehended by the authorities who were threatened by his righteous teachings and his ever-growing number of followers. As we were reminded in last week's Gospel, John had been commissioned to prepare the way of the Lord—to prepare people for Christ's coming ministry. We know from the story of Mary and Elizabeth that John had been long aware of this calling, when he leapt within his mother Elizabeth's womb upon recognizing the Christ-child within Mary. And John had dedicated himself so whole-heartedly to this calling that he lived out in the wilderness wearing clothing of camel's hair and surviving off of locusts and wild honey as he proclaimed the coming of the messiah, the Savior.

So when word came to John that there was a man whom others were claiming was the long-awaited messiah, you might think that John would respond by rejoicing. Finally, after the years John had devoted to preparing the way, here was the long-awaited Lord, the savior of the Israelites and of the world—the one John somehow knew while even in the womb. Yet that is not how John responds. No, John's response is far from joyful, but rather cautious, doubtful. He asks his disciples to send a message to Jesus. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Suddenly this man who was so dedicated to his holy calling that he lived like a crazy person out in the wild is not so confident. He wants some sort of assurance that Jesus was the man for whom he was preparing the way.

And who could blame him for not automatically responding with joy. We see where John's holy calling has landed him—in a jail cell. And he had likely yet to hear of someone who seemed to match the description of the messiah the Israelites were expecting—the great and powerful warrior/king/priest who would be able to deliver the Hebrew people from the hands of their oppressors. John understandably has his doubts, so he directly asks Jesus, "Are you the guy? Are you the Lord? Are you the messiah we have been waiting for?" And Jesus did not respond by saying, "Yes, I am the almighty and powerful messiah warrior/king/priest!" Instead, Jesus passes on this message. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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."

We can only guess what a reasonable or expected reaction to Jesus' response would be. John had assumed he was preparing the way for a mighty warrior, a powerful king, and a great high priest—that is what he thought the messiah would be like. Yet when he asks for verification of whether Jesus was this long-awaited messiah that John had been preparing for, the response doesn't seem to match the warrior priest king's identity. How will the people of Israel be delivered from their oppressors by a man who speaks nothing of military conquest or kingly authority, but instead speaks of how the ill and lame are healed, the dead are raised to life, and the poor are given hope?

In this single interaction, we see so clearly how it is the messiah will save the world. It's not through force or strength of arm, is not through status and throwing his weight around, it's through aiding those who have experienced pain and oppression, and delivering them from their distress. It's through lifting up the lowly. And in that truth, we can rejoice, for we do not have a savior who relies

on violence and force to deliver his people. And John, who was inquiring about Christ's identity from within a prison cell, would have been keenly aware of how life-changing being freed from bondage could be.

No, Christ is not the expected warrior/king/priest and praise be to God for that. For we have a savior that is always with us even in the darkest, loneliest times of our lives, and always with those who are oppressed. Our savior's powers are not like worldly powers, which rely on wealth or force, but powers that can be brought to light in any circumstance—whether it is through Christ's healings, teachings, or giving hope to the hopeless—it is a power that remains even after death. And we are called by this savior to go out into the world and do these things—to heal the sick and lame, to bring to life those who are dead in spirit, to bring good news to the poor. Our savior calls us into deeper relationship with God and asks us to follow God's call for us in our lives.

We see this example set in the story of Christ's mother, Mary. When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her of God's plans for her—plans for her to conceive and bear a son, whom she will name Jesus, and whose kingdom will have no end, Mary doesn't simply hang her head and do nothing or lament what God has in store for this as-yet unmarried young woman. She eagerly accepts this calling to which God has called her. She tells the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary didn't want to passively wait for whatever the Lord had in store—she wanted to be a part of it—she wanted to more fully live into her calling in whatever way she could. And she experienced joy through that. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord," she says, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

As it was right for Mary to rejoice it is right for us to rejoice this Gaudate Sunday. Even as we experience pain and doubt in this world, as John the Baptist did, we rejoice! For just as Christ answered John's questioning of Jesus' identity as messiah by speaking of the miracles he performed for the sick, the dead, and the poor, we know that Christ is always with us in the midst of our own struggles, in the midst of oppression, in the midst of the poor, and the sick, and the lowly, whom worldly powers too-often ignore—and the salvation that he offers is far greater than any earthly reward. And in the midst of the toils and tribulations of this world, we can rejoice in the fact that we, like John, have each been called to a holy calling, to live as Christ in this world, aiding those whom Christ himself aids. For even as we may be tempted to inaction, believing we should allow God to sort everything out, or even as we feel paralyzed by doubt or fear, we must look to the examples of people like John and Mary, whom any person at the time would have considered just another normal man or woman like you or me, yet who accomplished great things by being willing to live in to their holy callings.

So let us rejoice, not only in all that Christ has done, but in all that God is calling us to do and accomplish in this world. Let us listen attentively to what God is calling us to do now and in the future. Let us devote ourselves to our holy callings just as John and Mary devoted themselves. And let us pray for God to "strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!" For our savior, whom we follow, is with us and will one day walk this world again. Amen.