

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“*Rejoice!*” we are exhorted today. “*Rejoice always!*” Using the one-year lectionary, this Sunday was called *Gaudete* Sunday and was marked by rose colored paraments. In a nod to the historic series, the 3-year lectionary series also calls us each year on the Third Sunday in Advent to “*Rejoice,*” though the Sunday is no longer called by that name.

“*Rejoice,*” the church says to us today. It’s the antiphon for the introit: we repeat it. We hear the exact same words in the Epistle: “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*” We hear the prophet Zephaniah say it, “*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!*” But then we get to the Gospel, the Good News message, and we may wonder, “*what does this mean?*”

“*Rejoice, John?*” Of course, John was never arrayed in splendid clothing, soft and comfortable. His attire was “*camel’s hair and ... a leather belt around his waist.*” John never lived in “*a king’s court*” with a table set of fine wine and rich foods. Rather “*locusts and wild honey*” was his board, and the wilderness was his abode. But even that was surely better than Herod’s prison as he awaited his execution, for Herod wanted him dead.

St. Matthew tells us that’s where John is as we encounter him in our Gospel lesson. A pretty dark time in his prophetic calling. No more crowds flocking to him to hear him preach; no more interviews by the religious elite wondering who he was; no more divine epiphanies like that dove that he witnessed coming down and remaining on Jesus after he had baptized Him. John was in prison, and fatherly assurances that he was “*the prophet of the Most High*” could not keep the doubts from creeping in. “*Am I really that prophet, the voice, the messenger? Is Mary’s son really the Son of God? I’ve proclaimed it since before I was born, but could I be wrong? Could I be wrong that my cousin is ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?’ Why must God’s prophet endure this?*”

I, for one, don’t have a problem with the fact that John was having doubts as he sat in prison. This is the life of faith: a sequence of highs and lows, of feeling blessed by God and feeling abandoned by God, of wondering about Jesus, “*Are you really the One promised?*” or is this all a chasing after the wind?

And admit it, doubts arise when you’re experiencing similar times of darkness in your life: you are diagnosed unexpectedly with cancer, deranged gunmen have slaughtered your coworkers at a Christmas party, your spouse just asked you for a divorce, your child has been arrested for trafficking in drugs, you’ve just been laid off work, a fire in your house resulted in a total loss.

I think in this way we and John the Baptist are just alike. We struggle with our faith in dark times. We wonder “*where is God*” in the darkness? We wonder “*where is my help?*” “*Where is my keeper?*” Like John we may wonder of Jesus, “*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*”

But thanks be to God, He lightens the darkness of our hearts by His gracious visitation, even as He did for John. For Jesus said to John through his disciples, “*What do you see and hear. Those who are blind are seeing again and those who are deaf are hearing. Those who are lame are walking again, and those who have leprosy are cleansed. The dead are raised, and the Good news is preached in my name, just as God had foretold through his prophets about the One who was to come?*” Jesus was saying to John, “*Go back and listen to the prophets of old. Listen to the prophet Isaiah. ‘Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.’ Listen to the prophet, ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.’ Listen to the psalmist. ‘Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, ... who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless ...’*”

So, “*Praise the Lord!*” the Psalmist concludes. And “*Rejoice and exult with all your heart,*” the prophet proclaims, for the Lord “*is in your midst*” to save you, to turn your mourning into dancing, to take away your reproach. Rejoice in incarnation and redemption and resurrection!

Moreover, St. Paul’s exhortation today to “*Rejoice in the Lord always,*” comes not from someone who himself knew no suffering. He is in prison as these words sing from his pen. They are not an empty, “*don’t worry; be happy,*” but an encouragement in whatever situation we are in to be content, just as he was content. He confesses, “*I know how to be brought low,*” and indeed he did: through “*imprisonments with countless beatings,*” being “*stoned*” and “*shipwrecked*” and “*adrift at sea,*” “*in danger from rivers [and] robbers,*” danger from both Jews and “*Gentiles, danger in the city ... in the wilderness [and] at sea.*” He was brought low through “*toil and hardship,*” “*hunger and thirst,*” “*cold and exposure,*” and yet Paul says, “*I [also] know how to abound.*”

That is, Paul went through the same kinds of highs and lows in life as we do, and more than we, and yet was not offended by Jesus, that is, he didn’t lose his faith in Jesus. “*In any and every circumstance,*” he says, “*I have **learned** the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.*” The secret is Jesus

Himself. *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* Paul learned to boast both in his weakness and in the Lord. *“My grace is sufficient for you,”* Jesus said to him, *“for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* *“Therefore,”* Paul continues, *“I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

This is what Jesus is saying to John in his doubts and to us as we experience doubts in the midst of our faith. *“Look at me,”* He says, *“what I do and what I say. I know your situation, John, that you are still in prison. I know your situation,”* Jesus says to you. *“Don’t stumble and be broken on me as a rock of offense; don’t lose your faith just because evil still happens in this world and even to you. Satan is still active in the world; he still prowls around seeking to devour us. Don’t lose your faith. Sin is still in the world. Therefore, in the world, there will be tribulation. But I came for this very reason: to overcome the world by My cross, to be the world’s salvation by My sacrifice, to give forgiveness of sins by My blood, and to bring peace by My word.”*

Don’t be disappointed in the midst of hardship, dear saints, and don’t let your doubts overwhelm you. Believe in Christ. Stand in His grace. Be strengthened, as John was, in the knowledge of His gracious visitation: healing, opening, unstopping, loosing, cleansing, raising, feeding—dying, rising, loving, forgiving. Be strengthened by His gracious visitation to you now: by His encouraging word and sacraments. Rejoice *“in hope of the glory of God.”* Rejoice even in the mist of your own suffering, for you know *“that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*

Therefore, *“rejoice in the Lord, always,”* and especially as you come to the altar today. *“The Lord”*—the Coming One—*“is at hand”* for you.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.