

Sunday Sermon December 14, 2025

We are now at the third week of Advent, less than two weeks from Christmas.

Most of us have bought our trees, decorated our houses, been to at least one holiday party, and gotten a good jump on our Christmas shopping. So, when we come to church, we expect similar progress.

We heard from John the Baptist last week; it's time for Mary and Joseph, isn't it? Or the angels, or shepherds, or something similar that will help to get us into the Christmas spirit?

This is traditionally called "Gaudete Sunday." Gaudete is Latin for "Rejoice."

Commentaries tell us the third Sunday of Advent gives us a shift toward the joyful anticipation of Christmas, offering a break in the somber Advent tone. The pink candle we light represents joy. I have to say, I'm not so sure about all that, because here I am, with today's Gospel, squatting in a prison cell with a broken John the Baptist.

Last Sunday, John the Baptist's confidence was overflowing. Now he's sitting alone in a dark, clammy cell, questioning his earlier certainty and perhaps his very mission. Imprisoned for speaking the hard truth to Herod, John is in a spiritual crisis, wondering if he has staked his life on the wrong person.

As far as John can tell, the Messiah has changed nothing. He was supposed to make the world new. He was supposed to bring about divine justice, and fairness, and order. He was to end poverty, hunger, and disease. He was to execute the unrighteous and defeat the Roman Empire. Jesus was to finish the work John had started in the wilderness.

But nothing—nothing at all—has worked out as this disillusioned prisoner thought it would. And as he paces his cell, all he has to offer is an anguished question for the would-be Messiah: Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

If we think about John's background, his crisis of belief is a bit surprising. I mean, this is John the Baptist we're talking about. John's conception occasioned a visit from no less than the Archangel Gabriel. He leapt in his mother's womb with joy when his mother was visited by Mary, pregnant with Jesus. His powerful preaching brought huge numbers of people to repentance. John saw the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descend like a dove on the newly baptized Jesus.

If there was anyone who had reason for no doubt, it was John. Unfortunately, John's journey travels backward. He went from fire-and-brimstone confidence to uncertainty and despair—from firm hope in the Messiah doing all that a winning warrior would do, to desperation that there was no warrior after all.

This move is not unfamiliar to us. We are known to charge ahead with our dreams and plans, marching forward with confidence, only to be caught up short by some devastating illness, a death, a hurricane, a betrayal, or any of a thousand things that cause us to stumble, lose our confidence, question our faith, and wonder about our own mission.

This time of year, it can feel even harder. The manufactured cheeriness of the season sometimes seems to belittle our daily struggles. And I think we are also still waiting for the fulfillment of the Christmas promise.

I mean, the promises of peace on earth and goodwill among all are both what is so wonderful about Christmas and also what is so difficult about Christmas. The headlines, the “breaking news,” and sometimes our own homes make it clear that peace and goodwill are as scarce today as they were a millennium ago.

If, like John, we have doubt, are we to call it spiritual failure? Faithlessness? Backsliding?

Jesus doesn't. He responds to his cousin's pained question with gentleness, and maybe even relief. As if to say, “Good. You needed to let go of your preconceptions. Now you can get to know me—the real me.”

God in Jesus came not as the victorious conqueror who wipes all evil and sin and awfulness from the world that many then, and perhaps some or most of us now, wished he would.

Jesus came, and comes, as Emmanuel, God with us—the one who does not eliminate all our troubles but accompanies us through them. He holds onto us when

the world feels like it's falling apart. He enters into our suffering and struggles and reminds us that we are not alone. And he is the one who promises, ultimately, to bring us through death to new life.

Jesus, the Word made flesh and the light of the world, does not vanquish the darkness but shines in the midst of it.

"Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus tells the disciples who bring him John's question. Tell him 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. Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

In other words, Jesus says: Go back to John and tell him your stories. Tell him my stories. Why? Because who Jesus is cannot be captured in a sermon, a slogan, a book, or a billboard. He is far more elusive, mysterious, and Other than we, or John, or his disciples could imagine.

Who he is emerges in the lives of ordinary people all around us, if we listen to their stories—and if we pay attention to, and share, ours.

Did Jesus's answer satisfy him? Did it quell his doubts? We don't know. All we know is that the liberation Jesus spoke of did not come to John in his earthly life. Yes, the blind saw, and the deaf heard, and the poor received good news. But those joyful stories came to John secondhand. We don't know if they ever became his own. We know his story ended in a terrible death.

John's death has always rattled me. I always want to soften the blows when it comes to suffering, as though I could somehow make things okay.

But this story is not "okay," and many of our own stories aren't okay either.

Jesus calls us to see and to hear all the stories of the kingdom—and that includes John's story, too.

"Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me," Jesus says. Offense runs away. Offense erects a wall, hides behind it, and makes suffering okay. Reality is harsher and more complicated than we expected, or hoped, or want it to be. Some stories are terrible, period. They break hearts and end badly.

This, too, can be what a life of faith looks like. Don't take offense. Don't flee.

Someplace in us, I think we recognize that tears and laughter are the yin and the yang of one another.

Bizarre as this may seem, according to the Catholic Exchange, John the Baptist is the patron saint of spiritual joy. “My joy is now complete,” was his statement when he had fulfilled his mission of preparing the way for the Messiah.

And yet, his life on this earth ended in a prison of darkness. Maybe in the end he was able to be at peace and find joy because Jesus allowed him to know God for who he truly is.

“Are you the one who is coming?” John asked in despair.

“You decide,” Jesus answered in love.

“The needy are who I have come for. Is that you, John?”

Can we hear his answer? I believe his answer is filled with relief, and tears, and joy.

‘Yes. Yes. I am the needy. You came for me.’

Whatever our misgivings, whatever our disappointments, God is not disappointed in us. God in Jesus came not for the strong and the proud, but the weak and vulnerable. God in Jesus, in other words, came for us.

Maybe that’s why the beloved Christmas carol sings that “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in him tonight.” And we rejoice. Amen.