

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Third Sunday in Advent
December 16, 2007
Matthew 11:2-11

"Rejoicing in All Circumstances"

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

As you should have guessed from the very first word of the sermon hymn you sang this day, the theme of this Sunday is "Rejoicing": "Rejoice, Rejoice Believers." The old Latin name for the day "Gaudete" expressed the same thought. It is the reason the third candle on the Advent wreath is pink instead of blue. But there may be many people at this time of the year who are not really ready to rejoice. At first glance, even two of the Scripture readings for this day do not appear to have much cause for rejoicing in them. But this is more than made up for by the Old Testament Lesson which is full of exuberant joy. But all three lessons fit well today. They are a good reminder of our Advent preparation as the people of God who live under the cross, in a world afflicted by sin and its results, as people who face death, but are still able to rejoice. Indeed our theme says it well, "Rejoicing in All Circumstances."

I. The Doubt of John the Baptist

The Gospel lesson for today is the last recorded communication between John the Baptist and Jesus. As we listen closely to John's question and to Jesus' answer, we will hear the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ about the work of John and our place in relation to His kingdom and the reason that we may be rejoicing in all circumstances. Our text begins with the words, "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing ..." What a change in fortune for John the Baptist. He who so recently had large crowds flocking to him in the wilderness beyond the Jordan River is now a prisoner of Herod Antipas. And his imprisonment was due to the fact that John had fiercely and steadfastly condemned the incestuous and adulterous marriage of Herod with Herodias, his brother's wife. John had not been afraid to call sin a sin. From his preaching we know that it would have been out of character for him to do otherwise. And now he is imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus, according to historical sources, which overlooked the Dead Sea from a great height. And in his prison cell, John had much time to think and to ponder all the things that had occurred. And apparently he also had contact with some of his disciples who brought to him word of the ministry of Jesus. And as John heard what Jesus was doing, it is apparent that some doubts or questions arose in his mind. John had taught that Jesus would bring fire to earth, would wield the sickle against all wickedness and evil, and would bring the judgment of God on all sin and corruption. But what John heard of Jesus was far different than that. I am sure that he heard of Jesus' preaching and teaching, of his works of compassion, and that he even ate with publicans and sinners. It is recorded in another place in the Gospels how John's disciples complained to Jesus that while they fasted, His disciples feasted. And Jesus would respond, "No one fasts while the Bridegroom is present."

Now in his concern, John sent His disciples to Jesus to ask Him, "Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Commentators have anguished over this question of John's. They wonder how it could be possible that the chosen Forerunner of the Messiah, one who had been blessed with divine revelation regarding Jesus and his mission could show such signs of weakness. How could one who had so clearly proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" be in doubt? But in his questioning, John also shows his faith, much like another of Jesus' disciples who would say, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." For John turned to Jesus. Jesus would answer his question.

For us all, there should be great comfort in this event. For when we see the great men of God assailed by questions and doubts, like John, we need also to see them turn to Jesus. What greater example can there be for us.

II. The Fulfillment of the Word

And when the disciples of John the Baptist brought his question to Jesus, the Lord would respond most eloquently by turning John's attention to the promise of the Word. "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (v.4-6) What Jesus tells John is that the word should show Him that Jesus truly is the One who was to come. The work of the Messiah encompassed much more than the judgment of the world, for Jesus had come into the world to save it. In relating to John the miracles that he had performed he would remind him of the great prophecies of Isaiah regarding the work of the Messiah. One of those prophecies is our Old Testament lesson for this day. The words of the prophet Isaiah are indeed words of prophetic hope. They were written to a people facing the pressure of invasion, first by the Assyrians, and then by the Babylonians. But in spite of that, the prophet speaks exultantly of the triumph. He uses the language of the renewal of the desert: "The desert and the parched land will be glad, the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom, it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy." The desert will share in the glory of the wooded mountains of Lebanon, the lush splendor of Carmel and Sharon. The land that is lifeless will be full of life. The thing that is least expected will occur. And why, because as the prophet states: "Your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." And in that time, the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap like a deer, and those unable to speak will shout for joy. This is most certainly a Messianic vision, a prophecy of the promise of God in that time of his salvation. For as the Old Testament lesson concludes, "... The ransomed of the Lord will return, they will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." It is a call to rejoice in all circumstances. And it is based upon an Advent, the Lord himself will come. So Jesus is telling John, don't be offended by my work, cling to the promises of God. It's all there as it has been written. It is taking place according to my own Word.

And then Jesus turns to the crowd and he reminds them as well of the powerful assurance of the Word. He asks them about John, "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?" No, they did not go to see a man swayed by popular opinion or by the need to be well-liked. His condemnation of sin and hypocrisy was a message that needed to be heard as much by his generation as by ours. Jesus continued, "Did you go to see a man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces." And John, whose standard garb was a robe of camel's hair was in a king's palace now, but in the darkest dungeon, arrayed not in fine clothes but in the rags of a prisoner. Jesus continued, "Did you go then to see a prophet? Yes, a prophet." The last prophet of the Old covenant and the first prophet of the new. But he was more than a prophet. He was the voice. He was the messenger. For Jesus told the crowd there, "This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" John the Baptist was the promised messenger of the Lord, the one who would come to prepare the way for the Messiah Himself. As Jesus told the crowd gathered there, the one whom you went to see was greater than anyone ever born of women for his task was the greatest task in the world, to prepare the way for the Son of God. As Jesus said, "There has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." The Word of the Lord has proclaimed it.

III. The Reason to Rejoice

Finally, in the closing verse of the Gospel lesson, Jesus would give us a marvelous promise for this Advent season and the reason to rejoice in all circumstances. "He who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than He." We are greater than John the Baptist? Yes, for we have seen the fulfillment. John stood on the threshold. And like the prophets of old he wondered and inquired of the full work of the Messiah. But we know of that work in its entirety. Yes, we stand on the threshold of another Christmas. But we celebrate it as an Easter people. We are blessed for we view the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ from the whole perspective of his life and death and resurrection. The birth we are about to celebrate again is the birth of our Redeemer. The Jesus Christ whom we worship is the Lord of all, the triumphant King, the Savior of the world. For we have the word of assurance of our God that the promises have been fulfilled. Yes indeed, the smallest child who is baptized in Jesus' name is more blessed than John the Baptist. For the old has passed away, the new is come. And yet with John we too await the last day, the final consummation of the age. And that too is part of our Advent preparation. And the Epistle for this morning reminds us of the final Advent promise. "Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming," writes James. "The Judge is standing at the door!" The Lord will come again. For we all await the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory when sin and death and sorrow, sighing and suffering will be no more. So it is that James concludes the Epistle by referring to the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patience in the face of suffering.

There is still tribulation in the world. There is enough trouble to go around. There is even enough busy-ness and foolishness for everyone as well. But we need to look beyond this season, beyond Christmas, beyond the toils and cares and worries of this life. We need

especially to look beyond the 1,001 things that still need to be done in the 9 days that remain before Christmas. Above all, we need to look beyond the darkness of this world and see the Light, the light that will not fail, the light of the everlasting joy that awaits us in our Savior. And then we rejoice indeed.

Our hope and expectation,
O Jesus, now appear;
Arise, O Sun, so long for,
O'er this benighted sphere.
With hearts and hands uplifted
We plead, O Lord, to see
The day of earth's redemption
That sets your people free.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.