

GAUDETE (ADVENT 3)

December 16 2018 / D.M. Kerns

Isaiah 40:1-11

I Corinthians 4:1-5

Matthew 11:2-10

Standing...

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Advent herald is John the Baptist—
who sticks out like the pink candle on the advent wreath.

Jesus' word to John and to us is,
"Blessed is whoever is not trapped in connection with Me."

Let us pray. These are Your words Holy Father. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Sitting...

Two weeks ago,
our focus was upon Jesus' first Advent in humility, poverty and meekness...
coming to us on the down escalator as Pr. Bruss said,
when He was placed in a lowly manger,
eventually to ride into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey
and to face the lowly humiliation of the cross and death.

With that first Advent, Jesus came to save.
Ultimately sending out ministers in His name,
equipped with His Holy Spirit,
to preach His Gospel and to build His Church throughout all the world.

Last week our focus was upon Jesus' second Advent—
the one where He comes in glory—
when the Bible calls us to stand up straight and lift our heads
for our redemption draws near...
This is the Advent we anticipate—the one to come.

But then we have this time in between...
 between Jesus' first Advent and His second,
 where we all live right now,
 believing and watching—with lamps burning,
 just like those 5 wise virgins we hear about
 at the end of the Church Year.

Sometimes though we live during this time in confusion,
 sometimes in doubt—struggling to keep it all straight.
 And this is where our gospel lesson comes in.

John the Baptist was well-grounded in the OT Scriptures.
 He was well catechized, knowing that He was to herald the Advent of Christ.
 When John began his ministry on the banks of the Jordan River,
 he did exactly what the prophet Isaiah said he'd do—
 in that he would lift up every valley and level every mountain.

Lifting up the valleys included proclaiming repentance to the penitent,
"Come and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins."
 Then comforting them with the good news,
"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Leveling the mountains is what John preached to the impenitent—
 to the tax collectors, the soldiers and of course the Pharisees and Sadducees.
 Where he called them, **a brood of vipers!**
 Repent for the Christ is coming for you as well, but not as you think.
**"His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out
 His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will
 burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

John was relentless.
 He never deviated from preaching Christ and His gospel along with
 Christ and His judgment.
 He did this even in the face of authority—
 which is what landed him in prison.

As John languished there,
 not knowing what lie around the corner,
 he had this lingering, nagging question.
 Since Jesus is the Christ, and He was there in the flesh,

why wasn't He using the winnowing fork?
 Why wasn't the wheat being gathered into His barn?
 And why wasn't the chaff being burned up
 w/ unquenchable fire?

To help understand where he's coming from, the Old Testament was intentionally blurry in its prophecies about Christ's coming. I mean the Old Testament often blended together prophecies of His first coming and His second into one great prophecy, so that many Old Testament believers expected the Christ to come only once—for there to be only one Advent, where the Messiah would make atonement for sins and remove all wickedness from the world all at the same time. It's the way John sees it...

So, as Jesus carried on His work,
 it seemed to be nothing but grace—
 nothing but mercy.
 It was the lifting up of valleys,
 without a single act of judgment taking place.
 No mountains were being leveled at all.

John believed. John preached, and John expected.
 John did everything God sent him to do, and then some.
 He's lived his life alone, out in the desert, refusing every comfort of life.
 He's preached God's Word boldly and purely and tirelessly,
 and one by one, he sent his disciples away
 to follow after Jesus, instead of himself.

John did everything he was supposed to do,
 but the Christ...*not so much*.
 The Lamb of God was to make all things right,
 by destroying wicked men
 and saving His people from suffering at the hands of sinners—
 But, as everyone could see, the Romans were still running the nation,
 the Pharisees were still running the city,
 the Sadducees were still running the Temple and
 it sounds as if Jesus has gone soft.

His miracles were amazing, but they weren't solving the larger problem of evil.
 John trusted, but he didn't understand.
 He wasn't complaining. It just didn't make sense.

And if that, at times, isn't every single one of us in this place this morning, then I don't know what is. You trust...but there are times, more so than you want to admit, where you simply do not understand.

And why is that?

Because—admit it...

we want a God who makes things right and does so right now.

To make matters worse, one might say,

nothing seems to be improving in my life, in spite of being Christian.

I see my sinful flesh just as wicked and active as ever,

and I feel the struggle between faith and unbelief taking place in my own heart.

I see the world winning battle after battle against Christians,

and the Christian life becoming less and less comfortable

as the days goes by.

Christians suffer and die right alongside the wicked, and the devil?

He seems to be laughing all the way to the bank.

Rejoice in the Lord always? Forget that!

Who can do that when things are not as they should be,

and God's not doing more?

Beloved, that line of thinking carries consequences.

It can lead one to anger and cynicism

to fear, despair and other great shame and vice—

the loss of your faith altogether.

Repent of thinking this way.

It's from this confusion and doubt that John asks his question of Jesus,

“Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”

In other words, we were expecting bigger things at Your arrival:

Salvation for God's people.

Vengeance against Your enemies.

The end of pain and suffering.

The restoration of Paradise.

But...the wicked...they still prosper,

and the godly are in prison,

they are weak

and they suffer.

Hearing this,

Jesus could have used a word of Law to crush John's unbelief,
but instead our Lord answers John in a way to strengthen his faith.
He points John back to the Scriptures—
to places in the book of Isaiah which John most assuredly knew.

Essentially Jesus tells him:

Stop focusing on the things I'm not doing that you think I should be doing.
Focus instead on what I'm doing now.

You see Me doing the miraculous signs predicted in the Old Testament...good.
You hear Me preaching the Gospel to the poor—namely, those who are poor in
spirit...good.

I know you're ready for Me to ignite the "refiner's fire" upon sinners—
to lather up that "launderers' soap" on them.
That will happen, but not now.

For now—focus on what I'm doing.

That's all you should expect.

Don't be offended by it.

And don't be offended by Me,
the humble Preacher of the Gospel.

Now gang, this is crucial—not only for John, but for us, and certainly me.

I mean look, can someone stumble—maybe even give up on Jesus because
they're not satisfied that His plan for this world includes suffering...

They sure can—but blessed are they who don't stumble over that.

Can one give up on the Christian faith because they're not content with the
humble working of Jesus through the ministry of Word and Sacrament?

They can do that too—

it's why people run to heterodox church bodies like their pants are on fire.

But blessed are they who don't give up on Jesus and His humble ways.

Beloved, you won't understand all the plans that God has for this world, His Church
or for your life for that matter.

You don't know the Day of His return in glory,

and you won't escape the reality of this world's sin,
suffering and death, until you die.

We are not to stumble because of these things.

And we are not to be offended because of Jesus' ways—

or because the cross we bear is heavy,
 or because His Church looks impotent,
 or because He isn't making everything right, right now.

He will—but in the meantime,
 the kingdom of Christ remains hidden,
 where He comes to earth "on the down escalator" to the
 hearts of mankind with words—with promises,
 not with fire and angelic warriors like we all want Him to,
 but with humble words of preaching and teaching,
 words connected with outward signs
 of water and bread and wine.

Focus on what I'm doing now Jesus says—not what you think I should be doing.

So, what's He doing now?

God is speaking to you—
 through His Word and your pastors.

The only launder's soap you get now
 is His abrasive Law exposing and condemning your sin,
 calling you to repentance,
 which is followed by the cleansing power of His Gospel
 as it drives you to Jesus and pronounces forgiveness over you.
 Through this He kindles your faith and fans it into a flame.

For now, He gives you His body and blood, and comforts you under the cross.

He hears your prayers, and He holds you up,
 as His dear child, even in your darkest hour.

What He's doing now—what He's doing right now—

is enough to sustain and keep you in the one true faith,
 all the days of your life.

And knowing what to expect while you're expecting Christ to return
 enables you—to rejoice.

"Blessed is whoever is not trapped in connection with Me."

In the Holy Name of Jesus, Amen.

Standing...And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.