

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.’”

John the Baptizer was in prison. He wasn't a murderer. He wasn't a thief. No, he was a preacher who preached to people. This wasn't simply he made them feel bad, he rightly accused them as a messenger of God of their sin. The rulers of the Jews didn't like him calling them out of their sin and to look to the coming Christ. There was real substantial content to his preaching. He called them a “brood of vipers” after all. The law of God he preached called them to repentance. Herod also didn't like John the Baptist when John called him to repentance as well for his vile deeds. John afflicted the comforted. And where did it get him? It got him thrown in prison and eventually killed because of the words that came out of his mouth.

People went out to hear John preach. He drew crowds. It was a sight to see. Jesus goes on further in Matthew's Gospel reading, “As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Jesus asked the crowds before him why they heard John preach. He called them to examine their hearts to ask themselves, in a sense, “What'd you expect to hear from a faithful prophet of God? Were you just wanting a show, to be entertained, or were you expecting him to make you feel good?” John's job was simple, he was the messenger who was to prepare the way of the Lord. And what happened? What did this Jesus do to whom he was pointing? Well, “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” It was just as the prior prophets all leading up to John had said. The Lord made good on his promises for he had come and did all things well.

Jesus was and is who he said he was, and he was and is what the prophets said he would be. In these words, God's faithfulness is shown. The Lord kept his word to his people. The promised one who would deliver his people had come. He is the one who confirmed who is with miracles such as giving sight to the blind, giving mobility to the lame, hearing to the deaf, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, and preaching the good news that the poor in spirit would inherit the Kingdom of God, which is where true riches, eternal riches are found.

For John the Baptist, this is what he had been preaching. He was pointing people to Jesus. He was calling them to repentance; to turn from their sin and fix their eyes on the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was pointing them to the one who even raises the dead as Jesus himself would lay down his own life and raise it up again on the third day. And for John, who would die because of what he said for the sake of God, there's great comfort for him in prison and reason to rejoice. I saw a post on Facebook yesterday from the Indiana District President that said, “It is better to be comforted by the Gospel in your misery, in the midst of sin and death, than to be comfortable, content, and at home in this world that is perishing.” That applies well to John the Baptist.

For you sitting here today and hearing this word of God you take all this in and see what has happened. Jesus, the long expected one has come. He has fulfilled all things as the word of God had said and John testified to him. His work is complete and now he continues to preach this saving word to all people. God calls you to listen to this word. He calls you to be disciples, students, of it that it may dwell in you richly. He calls you to live it.

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent—Gaudete—December 17, 2023

This third Sunday in Advent God shows you what faithfulness looks like, and it is seen through suffering. But there's joy even in suffering because through faith you see and have the one who suffered in your place and conquered death by his death and is risen again to new life. God is directing you to see your life today with this example of John who preached God's word and believed. He was decreasing as Christ was increasing and blessed is one who is not offended by Jesus, his word, his church, or his teaching. Especially as this secular year is ending be reminded of what is lasting and eternal. See the long-expected Jesus and look to him as John pointed to him in his ministry and even suffered death for this confession. Be steadfast and immovable in the faith God has given to you. Don't be comfortable in this world and its ways. Repent of your sin and find comfort where true comfort is found.

When you hear these words of God spoken to you what does this all mean? Where are you to look? Well, follow the example of John and his disciples. What is it? Listen to Jesus. What does he say? He says to you, you are baptized into Christ. Everything that was promised by the prophets and fulfilled in Jesus belongs to you. You see, that means everything. Find comfort in Jesus because he is your Redeemer. Sin, death, and the devil afflict you. They want nothing more than you to suffer in hell for all eternity. This is the reality of being in this world and seeing all of sin and its consequences around you. Your Lord, though, is Jesus who has come, is here now, and is coming again. You have comfort. You rejoice in this life even now.

“Rejoice in the Lord always”. God commands you to do that, but he also gives you the reason and substance of that joy and gives you comfort. Fixing your eyes on Christ crucified and risen you see that your sin is forgiven, and you stand righteous before the throne of God. That's first and foremost and defines every aspect of your life as you go through this world. It's no wonder, then, when you look at a word like “rejoice” in the New Testament it's often in the context of experiencing times of suffering. Romans 5 also says this about rejoicing, “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing 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.” Listen to the words, God calls you to look to Christ and see what you have now in him and what awaits you in the future.

As Christians in this world looking toward the Last Day, this is all so vitally important. The devil is prowling around, and he wants you to find joy in the things of this world which will pass away and not remain as Jesus told you in the Gospel reading last week when he said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” And then do you remember what he said right after that? Jesus said, “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.”

Jesus knows you and the dangers you face to your faith in him. Your sinful flesh, which is grass as the Old Testament reading teaches, wants to find joy in yourself too and that's just as deadly. That false joy is always pursuing and never satisfied. It's always looking for something bigger and more pleasurable. Joy is held before you like a carrot always out of reach and your life becomes consumed and enslaved to the elementary principles of this world and you have run away from Christ and where true joy and freedom are really found.

Listen to the Lord and heed his call. Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Know who you are as God's word confronts you in your sin. Don't be fooled but stay awake. Go running to Christ for forgiveness and rejoicing in what Christ has done for you and the new life he gives you for the devil, the world, and your fallen flesh tempt you to run away from God and turn God's word into the unloving bad guy who doesn't care about you or your life. Say “no” to all those things because at the end of the day when you give into temptation, wherever and from whomever it may come you will find there is no real lasting joy. God calls you and all people to repentance because he desires that you live, he desires that you have, and now true joy found in Christ.

Jesus says clearly in the Gospel reading today, “blessed is the one who not offended by me.” If Jesus and God's word offends you, you are the problem, not God. If you don't find joy in the word of God, and the faithful proclamation of it

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and the faithful practice of it in the church, God is not the problem. Comfort and Joy aren't found in yourself, they found and known when you look outside of yourself and look at Christ. Will you always see this comfort and joy well, not in an emotional sense as the world describes joy and has taught us to understand it. But you when you see Jesus and when you see that he has done all for your salvation and see that you have been given eternal life and he will guard and keep you in this forever, wow, then there is lasting joy. This is your baptismal life. Live out your baptism which daily drowns the old man and lives in the new life you have been given. God calls you to rejoice in the Lord always. He calls you to look to him at times.

And you know, the more you look to Christ and outside of yourself the more joy you see and find yourself rejoicing in any and every circumstance. It happens and God does grant you to see this joy in the faith he has given to you. God's word becomes something for you as you go through this life too, it's comfort because you see God's faithfulness to his promises, he has made to you, and you know that each day the Lord is faithful and will always be faithful. You start to define your life by what God says and if called to suffer all even death for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom, then so be it you do it rejoicing every step of the way and until your last breath on this earth because you know you will be rejoicing before the throne of God forever with all of God's saints rejoicing with you.

Take heart dear people of God this day. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand." People of God, it's Advent. The Lord has come, he comes to you now, and he is coming again. The day for rejoicing is here. Jesus has redeemed you by his blood and you are an heir of eternal life. Always remember that and cling to it. Christ is yours and you are his forever. What a joy that is to know this and have this and to confess this in the world. You are Christian and in times of great happiness you rejoice. In times of great sorrow, you rejoice. In the humdrum day to day things of this life, you rejoice. When death stares at you and your life on this side of the grave is coming to an end, you rejoice.

"And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.'" That's why you rejoice and in whom you find your joy. Jesus has come. He's here now so listen to him, take and eat his very body and blood given and shed for you. You have eternal life and a clear conscience to stand before God. Clinging to Jesus crucified for you there is great comfort because you know what your future holds. What a wonderful thing to have placed before your eyes today this Advent. God is yours and you are his. Strife, violence, sin, sickness, persecution, upheaval, the devil, and death have been overcome and their works will come to an end. John the Baptist lost his head for the sake of Christ, but the Lord raises bodies from the grave to immortality and incorruption. Your future is a future of comfort and joy. Rejoice in him and rejoice as you look forward to that day when he comes again not in the lowliness of the manger or hidden in means but when he comes again in great glory as only, he can do. Rejoice in the Lord always. He is at hand. The Lord has come, he is here now and for you in his means of grace, and he is coming again to take you to a comfort beyond compare that will last forever. People of God rejoice, and come, Lord Jesus!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.