

Advent III

December 15, 2024

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Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!

On this third Sunday of Advent we celebrate “Gaudete Sunday” - Rejoice Sunday - Joy Sunday

It gets its name from that opening line I offered which are the first words of the Latin mass for this day and it’s why we switch the paraments and vestments to pink instead of purple

A fun nugget of knowledge about church history is that Advent used to be a 40 day fast much like Lent

It started mid-November, right after the Feast of St. Martin on November 11th, and ended on Christmas Day

It was changed to a four week season in the 9th Century

And both Advent and Lent have midpoint Sundays that are celebrated as an opportunity to lift some of the restrictions that otherwise are in place during a fast

Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday in Advent, and Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, are midway points in each fast

The lifting of restrictions, according to Wikipedia, was to emphasize that joy and gladness are promised in God’s redemption¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaudete_Sunday

We don't typically celebrate Advent in the same way we celebrate Lent – at least not outside of church

Most of Advent is a bit more of the Gaudete energy – merry and bright

But here in church on Sunday mornings in Advent we have been beholding the themes of Advent: the expectation, the anticipation, the wondering as we wander the wilderness

Today on Joy Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, our rejoicing comes from our brother John the Baptist again

And no matter how hard John tries to sound rejoice-y he always ends up sounding rather bothered

“You brood of vipers!”

Well that's one way to start a sermon, John

“Repent!” or rather, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” - another great John the Baptist line

Still sounds more Lent-ish than Gaudete, at least at first glance

Where is the joy?

No doubt our ability to hear the joy in John's proclamation is inhibited by the general understanding of the word “repent”

More often than not, we equate repentance with contrition, contrition being (according to google) the state of feeling remorseful and penitent

It's the part of repentance that deals with the admission of sins and the being sorry for our sinfulness

Which, to be honest, is a place we need to dwell sometimes - it's not a *bad* thing

But, repentance has an additional, *major* step that often gets overlooked: metanoia

It's another one of those great church words in Greek that means (again, according to google) to change one's way of life

Repentance starts with contrition – acknowledging and confessing sin – and then moves into metanoia – turning from our previous ways and committing to a new path

Metanoia is still a more Lent-y word than it is typically an Advent-y word, but it is our key to finding the joy in today's lesson from Luke

John says to those who have come to see him in the wilderness: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance"

What are the fruits of repentance?

Troy Troftgruben, New Testament Scholar from Iowa, writes "Luke offers tangible examples of what repentance looks like. In response to John's message, three different groups ask for guidance: the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers. To each, John gives distinctive instructions: share clothing and food (crowds), collect justly (tax collectors), and be content without extortion (soldiers). All three examples depict acts of generosity, justice, and contentment."²

What does repentance look like?

It looks like generosity, justice, and contentment

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-luke-37-18-6>

Dare we say, the fruits of repentance are the very values and realities we see Jesus embodying in his lifetime and the ones we strive to achieve in our day as well

Troftgruben: "In Luke...repentance is not just a feeling—it means concrete acts of change. It amounts to recalculating the course of one's life"

Ever since Thanksgiving, I have been listening to two radio stations in my car who are playing nothing but Christmas music

One of them is typically an oldies station, 105.5, and one of their regular sound bites is how their switch to playing Christmas music this time of year is a treasured Christmas tradition and then periodically they give these historical anecdotes about other Christmas traditions

Ever wondered why people put lights in their windows at Christmas – they have at least 2-3 sound bites that give a couple of different histories

Why do we say "Merry Christmas" – you have Charles Dickens to thank for that apparently

Advent wreaths – they've covered it

Advent being only 4 weeks instead of 40 days - well, no, that's a nugget you get here at church

Recently, I heard one of these sound bites and it was related to why people are generous this time of year

The radio station pointed towards England around the time of the industrial revolution and the wide socioeconomic gap that the revolution created and people's subsequent response to the needs of the poor

I find all of these sound bites interesting, and sometimes I question the researcher who put them together - “is *that* the history of generosity this time of year?”

But, the sound bite around generosity came to me when I read Luke’s story about John the Baptist this week

What about the history of generosity in the church? Not just at Christmas time but also all year long?

Does it take a certain cultural movement or idea to get us to pay attention to the needs of our community? Like the industrial revolution or more recently a global pandemic, or war?

Does it take a certain time of year or holiday to get us to pay attention to the needs of our neighbor? Like Advent or Christmas or Lent?

Or is generosity woven into the very fabric that is the quilt of our faith?

Honestly, isn’t it all of the above and more?

I can’t say that I would have pointed the researcher from the radio station to John the Baptist as a literary source of Christian generosity - to be honest I sometimes forget Luke’s account of John’s life

But reading this morning’s gospel I started to see the genesis of our generosity in this very person!

John knew that preparing ourselves to receive Christ in our lives required repentance – both the contrition part AND the metanoia part

John washed people in the river as a way to address the contrition part – he helped people wash themselves clean of sin

And when the crowds, and the tax collectors, and the soldiers came to him and said “and now what?”

John said: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise...Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you...Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

Live your repentance, live your forgiveness - John basically says – and that looks like generosity, justice, and contentment

Troftgruben: “The call to repentance may truly be good news. It invites us to take practical steps toward aligning our lives more squarely with God’s purposes—not just in theory, but in practice. It takes the internal and abstract aspects of faith and makes them external and concrete. It gives opportunity for faith to have full expression.”

Repentance – generosity, justice, and contentment – woven into the very fabric of our faith. Heard on the third Sunday in the Season of Advent as we prepare to receive Christ into our lives, and proclaimed in a time when there are wars in the world and neighbors in need.

Rejoice! Repent! The genesis of our generosity! The fruits of our repentance! There is joy in our redemption!

How might your faith have full expression this Advent as you prepare to welcome Christ into your heart?

May God bless you in your discernment.

Amen.