

Sermon Advent 3C
All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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December 15, 2019

Three candles! Three candles out of four are now lit on our Advent wreath. The day we're all waiting for is getting closer. As we light the Advent candles, we remember that they represent first the Hope, then the Love, then Joy and then the Peace that arrive with the coming of Christ.

This Third Sunday of Advent, the day we light the candle of Joy is often called "Gaudete" Sunday, for the latin word "Rejoice." And today as we light the candle for "Joy," we hear from the prophet Isaiah a passage just bursting with Joy. He says that in the day of the Lord's coming, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly, That "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the speechless sing for joy. Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water."

What Isaiah is describing is an overflowing abundance pouring forth from the Lord, in the places that were once considered desolate. In that day, the Lord will cause vital, vibrant, verdant life to burst forth out even from the wastelands of the earth. As we light the third candle on our wreath, we celebrate the overflowing generosity of our God when he acts to bring good things to the hopeless and raise new life up from the ashes.

Joy. We certainly see it on the faces of children this time of year - excitement over the glow of the lights, the expectation of gifts, the decorations, the music, the parties and fun. But as we draw closer and closer to that Silent Night, we ask ourselves: Are these things the true JOY Christ came to bring? The glitter and sparkle of the holiday season? Or is there something more?

We hear this question from our wild and wooly friend John the Baptist this week. John, who by this time, we hear, has been apprehended by authorities for speaking truth to power, and thrown into prison before his prophetic proclamation could do anymore damage to their social order. He asks, of his younger cousin Jesus, "Are you it? Or is there someone else?" Is this it? Or should we wait for something more? More what? More fanfare? More charisma? More wealth? More pizzazz?

John asks, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect another?" Although he has heeded the call by God to go out and herald the coming of the one of whom he is not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandal... Although he recognized at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan that his younger cousin was far greater than he... He's still not 100% sure that this... that Jesus... is the one.

We don't know why John is uncertain of Jesus' true identity. Is it because he's grown up knowing Jesus, a relative, the carpenter's boy, and so he has formed doubts in his mind if his destiny would truly be... Or is it because he doesn't really know Jesus? Perhaps the distance between their families and John's "alternative lifestyle" has not afforded him the opportunity to get to know the son of his mother's cousin. We don't know the source of John's uncertainty, but we do know that in it, he was not alone. Even those who were among the crowds following Jesus himself were not always sure of the true nature of his identity.

For years, for centuries, the People of God had been awaiting the Messiah the one who would arrive to herald the advent of the hope, love, joy and peace they believed would once again flourish among the people of Israel. They were waiting, they were ready, they had had more than enough of the abuse perpetrated on them by the Nations - by surrounding invaders and by the occupying Empire, and they were ready for that promised day of joy when the desert of their longing would be transformed once again into an Eden of peace and prosperity.

But when Jesus of Nazareth came onto the scene and began his public ministry, even after John the Revelator came through to prepare the way, the people took one look at him - this humble carpenter from Galilee - and they asked themselves the same question we heard from John: "Is this the one? Or are we still waiting?" They had wanted a Savior - a Messiah - the Awaited Anointed. But this wasn't exactly what they had expected. They had wanted a champion, and God sent a preacher. They wanted a warrior, and instead God sent a healer. They had wanted a king, and yet God sent a carpenter.

This Advent Season, we are invited to ask ourselves what we are waiting for. As we prepare with joy the coming of the King, as we engage the expectant longing of the day of his return, many of us are holding out hope for what the promise of Christmas will bring, for us.

Our hope may simply be for a time to reflect on all the blessings we have in life. Our we may be looking forward to a moment of rest amidst the holiday rush. And for many of us, Christmas may bring exactly what we've been waiting for. But for others of us, what we are hoping for may seem to fall just out of reach. For some of us, what we may truly be longing for just may not be the reality we are facing this season.

What we may have wanted was for this holiday season to "feel" more peaceful.... We may have been hoping to feel more secure, financially or professionally... We may have been wishing for one more Christmas with someone we love... Or for this year in the news to have reflected more of our values and fewer of our fears... As we await the fulfilment of God's promise of abundance, What we may have been expecting may look very different than the reality in which we find ourselves. And we may hear our own voices join with John and the others asking, "Is this it? Or are we to expect something more?"

We are here to proclaim the truth of God's abundance. We are here to affirm that God does fulfill God's promises. But, as we find so often in the life of faith, the fulfilment God provides does not always align with our expectations. God is faithful. God is a God of fulfilled promises. Life with our God is always overflowing with good things. But those things may not always look exactly how we hoped. Along our own walk of faith, we may have wanted to avoid the times of trial, but we find that, instead of a life free from pain, God has given us partners to travel alongside us through the rocky terrain.

We may have hoped to live life free from health problems - for us or our families - but instead what we find is that God has given us the gift of endurance, which produces character, and character produces hope. We may have wanted to have a comfortable existence, but we may find instead that throughout our challenges, God has given us strength & peace that passes all understanding.

This Gaudete Sunday, we celebrate the hope of God's joy-filled abundance, even if it does not look like what we are expecting We may seek fulfillment in the form of answers, security or healing, but

we discover instead, God gives us so much more. This Christmas we may not get exactly what we were waiting for, but we discover instead, that God gives us Jesus.

This Advent, instead of asking the question of John, “Is this it?” Let’s instead ask ourselves the question posed by Jesus: “What did you expect to see?” Perhaps we can begin to train our expectations to be measured less by the metrics of this world and more by the touchstone of faith.

Jesus asks the people who had gone out into the wilderness to see his cousin John, before his imprisonment, “What did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? “Look,” he said, “those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces” Basically he’s saying, ‘If you were looking for people in soft robes, you knew where to go to find them. But you weren’t. You were seeking something else. ‘You’ve seen enough of the privilege that abides in the halls of power. You instead came out to the wilderness. You were looking for something more. So ask yourselves: What did you expect to see?’

They went out to the desert. They had had enough of the empty promises of the politicians in the city, They had heard the messages coming from the religious majority. And instead they came out to hear a voice crying in the wilderness, they came out to John to hear a prophet tell them the difficult but necessary truth, the truth they believed would lead to life.

So what about us? What are we expecting? What about us in the pews this morning? What did we come out to hear? You could have stayed home this morning. Or you could have turned on the TV and gotten a good dose of the prosperity gospel from some celebrity preacher. But instead, you’re here. What did you expect when you walked through these doors? Did you expect to be comforted? Did you expect to be challenged? Did you expect to hear a Word from the Lord for you life today? And if so, who did you expect to hear it from? If your experience is going to mirror that of the people in today’s Gospel, the prophets you encounter may come in a form you may least expect.

Ten years ago, when I was an intern at a Lutheran Church in the Midlands, we were in the practice of having weekly Wednesday-night suppers. We would gather at church, share fellowship with one another, and then divide up into different small-group activities. Every Wednesday, we expected to encounter the same cast of characters. Dottie and Carolyn were usually in the kitchen, while Frank, Krista, Rob & others began to congregate around the tables. But one Wednesday night, a stranger walked through the doors. Of course, like any Lutheran Church, we were always hoping for new people to find us, but to be completely honest, not people like this.

Barb came in wearing a raggedy old dress that was two sizes too big, hanging off one shoulder, with worn out old sneakers, her hair completely disheveled, carrying a grocery bag for a purse. While the pastor welcomed her in, dear Dottie went straight for her showed her to a table, and proceeded to make her a plate in the kitchen.

We thought, like most transients that showed up at our church, she would take the meal, whatever else she could get, and be on her way. But Sunday, when it was time for church, there was Barb, sitting in worship. She became a regular on Sundays and Wednesday nights - especially when meals were being served. We learned that Barb had been homeless, was unemployed but had recently secured housing. But every time the offering plate was passed around, Barb had something to put in.

As I learned her story, it was clear that Barb was one of those people who had never been able to become financially stable, but she was determined to try again to secure employment and to try to make

ends meet. One day, she asked me if I could give her a ride to an appointment at the county vocational rehabilitation and training center. Even though the center was on the other side of town, I was eager to help her, so I agreed.

When I picked her up that morning, and drove her the thirty minutes to her appointment, I expected to be the minister. What I didn't expect was that that day, she would be ministering to me. Barb spent the entire day sharing the gospel with me. Despite her situation in life, her faith was incredible. She didn't care one bit that I was wearing a collar and she was practically in rags. She ministered to me openly and honestly - not condescendingly, but with the intent of telling me everything she'd learned about the true presence of Christ. The last we ever heard of Barb was when her sister back up in Minnesota put her on a plane home to try to give her a second chance, after she was evicted from her apartment and had already spent a week sleeping on a couch in the church.

After she was gone, dear Dottie came up to me after church on Sunday and said, "Pastor...do you think Barb was Jesus?" And without a moment's hesitation, I said, "Yes, Dottie...I think she was." In the presence of this person, who according to the ways of this world was absolutely going nowhere, in the opportunity to share, serve, feed...and then to be served in turn, we saw the presence of Jesus. She showed us all what it meant to fully rely on God, to give not out of her abundance but out of her poverty, and to share the good news, no matter the cost.

I can tell you without a doubt not one of us thought when she walked through the doors that Wednesday night, that she would be the one to teach us, but I bet you, ten years later, not one of us has forgotten her. Was her way of life ever going to produce results in this world? Absolutely not. Would I recommend her recklessly haphazard lifestyle to anyone? No But will she be among the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Probably. For all I know, she may already be sitting at the right hand of her Lord.

What did you come out to see? What did you expect to hear? Where do you expect to encounter the Word of God? Where do you expect to meet Jesus? Is it in the city, from the halls of power? Is it from the places of privilege? Or out in the wilderness, among the humble, the meek, and the lowly? This Advent, we are all waiting for something. But let us ask ourselves: what is it we are waiting for? What are our expectations this Christmas? Are they simply for a pleasant, or day say perfect, holiday? We all have hopes for what we'll find this Christmas, But when it comes down to it, what we are getting is Jesus.