

Joyfully Waiting for Jesus

The third candle in our Advent wreath is a different color than the others because today, we celebrate Gaudete Sunday, sometimes called Rose Sunday. “Gaudete” is derived from the Latin word for “rejoice.” Marking the halfway point in Advent, Gaudete Sunday is intended to give us a joyful pause in our contemplative waiting for Jesus’s return. As the Reverend Canon Whitney Rice notes in her sermon, “God’s Joy is Justice,” Gaudete Sunday’s name comes from Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Our readings from Zephaniah and the Canticle of Isaiah echo Paul’s joyful tone. It’s all upbeat until we encounter John the Baptist beside the Jordan River, slinging threats and calling names.

The consensus among commentators seems to be that John’s “brood of vipers” insult and harshest warnings are directed at arrogant Pharisees who imagine that their Abrahamic ancestry protected them from divine judgment. Though Matthew tells it that way, Luke says John speaks to the crowd as a whole. When he does, John’s tone and advice to the non-Pharisees in the crowd are more temperate. He’s relatively kind to the tax collectors, even to the Roman soldiers who seem sincere in asking John how they should live. Ultimately, though, John returns to making dire predictions that the coming Messiah will separate the wheat from the chaff and “the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” His words are ominous enough that we might wonder why people keep traveling all the way to the Jordan River to listen to him. Being scolded isn’t much fun, even when the person doing the scolding is impressive enough to make his listeners wonder whether he might just be the Messiah himself. Impressive as he is, though, Canon Rice is probably right that there are good reasons why John lives alone in the desert, far outside his community. John is pretty intense. Much as people admire him, he probably doesn’t get invited to a lot of parties.

When prophets ancient or modern threaten disaster, some listeners experience a shiver of pleasure in others' misfortunes. The Germans call that nasty sensation *schadenfreude*, which literally means "joy in damage." *Schadenfreude* rises up when it looks as though someone is about to get a well-deserved comeuppance. We can forgive *schadenfreude*; it can be very satisfying to see confirmed scoundrels pay the piper at last. Still, I don't think we're supposed to rejoice when the scoundrels we know are condemned to spend eternity in unquenchable fire. So, assuming God wants us to wish all of his children well no matter how little we think they deserve it, how can we rejoice in John the Baptist's warnings?

Canon Rice suggests that John's words are discomfiting because we misunderstand them. When John talks about separating the wheat from the chaff, we may think he means two kinds of people. The observant faithful are the wheat, the sinners are the chaff, and the latter are destined for the everlasting flames. It's a Scriptural interpretation that many preachers have promoted, threatening generations of Christians with eternal damnation. But what if, as Canon Rice asks, John is talking not about people, but about qualities that everyone shares? What if each of us is a complex mix of wheat and chaff? What if John didn't predict that his cousin Jesus would come to condemn who fell short of God's ideal? What if, instead, John meant that Jesus would come and burn away the chaff of our human flaws, leaving behind only the virtuous, golden grain in each of us? What if the refiner's fire is not an instrument of torture but an instrument of grace? Wouldn't that give us ample reason to rejoice?

There are theologians who disagree with Canon Rice's interpretation; I'm not among them. It has never made sense to me that our gracious God would set up his beloved children for eternal torment, admitting that none of us is perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect and some of us are vast distances from it. The refinement process may well be uncomfortable – fire is fire,

after all. But enduring the pain as our shortcomings burn away is a small price to pay if it allows us to step into the role that Jesus has prepared for us. Let's consider what that role might be.

Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill believed that, when Jesus described our Creator as "my Father and your Father, my God and your God," he was offering his followers what she called "the tremendous privilege of partnership." Put another way, Jesus told the disciples to expect the long-awaited Messiah so they could participate in his work to bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Mystic or not, Underhill was nothing if not a realist. She knew that evil, injustice, and misery are part of reality and that it's hard for us to understand why God allows them. But Underhill insisted that, as much as we struggle to account for the darker side of life, we must account for its beauty and blessings as well. Underhill saw "the existence of gentleness, purity, self-sacrifice, holiness, [and] love" in this world as proof that reality is sacred, and our Creator is hard at work. Having been granted the tremendous privilege of partnership, we become fellow workers with God because we are co-heirs with Christ. In other words, we're allowed to play too. And that, I hope we can agree, is ample reason to rejoice.

Christianity's understanding of joy has been transformed by the New Testament, perhaps especially by Paul's letters. We tend to think of joy as happy cause to celebrate, something you feel when everything seems to be going your way and something you desperately wanted just dropped into your lap. When Paul urged the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord, he wasn't ignoring those good things; he was just talking about something different. Paul was referring to the deep, permanent gladness that comes from confidence in our salvation, from being in loving relationship with Christ and our fellow Christians and seeing God's hand at work in the world. Our Christian joy doesn't depend on outside circumstances because our relationship with Christ survives and sustains us whatever goes wrong in the secular world.

This isn't to say that we can't enjoy nice things and pleasant experiences. As St. Augustine observed in his *Confessions*, there is much beauty in worldly things, and they can give us a great deal of pleasure. We are at least somewhat happy whenever our desires are satisfied, and a fortunate few among us can be happy even when all they have is hope of eventually receiving what they want. But our desires and our happiness are both subject to change, so no earthly pleasure can produce lasting joy. For that, Augustine tells us, we must turn to God, the highest good, who is changeless and eternal, and whose love for us never waivers. Only God can give us lasting rest, contentment, and the joy that passes understanding and stays with us after the pleasures we derive from worldly things have faded and passed away.

So, what are we to take away from all of this? For one thing, I think we can put aside any shame or dread that fallen human religious leaders have tried to force on us. We can hear John the Baptist's words not as a threat of condemnation, but as a promise that, if we ask him, Jesus will gladly remove our ugly bits, burning away the chaff of our shortcomings and making us fit to stand without fear before our Creator as full citizens of the Kingdom of heaven. We can enjoy the blessings of our lives, from the beautiful roses that grace our altar this Gaudete Sunday morning to the love of friends and family and the opportunity to serve as partners to God in bringing the Kingdom, so long as we remember not to let our earthly pleasures distract us from our heavenly ones. And we can trust God to bless us with enduring, indestructible joy that will comfort and sustain us even when devastating things happen in the world and in our lives. Thanks to Jesus, our Prince of Peace, we can wait for his coming in quiet confidence that, no matter what seems to be going wrong around us, the Father is securely seated on his heavenly throne, all's right with the world, and all of us are profoundly, perpetually loved. And for that, Lord Jesus, we gratefully rejoice. Amen.