



# SAINT MARK'S

## EPISCOPAL CHURCH

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. You have been gracious to your land, O LORD you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.” This is the traditional opening text, in what is called an introit, for the 3rd Sunday of Advent. For centuries it was chanted in Latin, and so it is the first word, Gaudete, where we derive the name of this Sunday as Gaudete Sunday. A Sunday that focuses on joy. On rejoicing. What makes this Gaudete Sunday stand out is the stark contrast the tone has with the rest of Advent. When placed in reference to the texts of the last two Sundays, Gaudete, can seem out of place. The first two Sundays of Advent have some fearful and dreadful tones in texts about the second coming and judgment day, the last two Sundays in Advent shift the focus towards the remembrance of the incarnation of God in the Christ child with joyful expectation. And this tension of Advent fear and anxiety mixed with joy and anticipation, a tension best seen this Gaudete Sunday, is exactly why at its core it is such a powerful season.

I have heard many people say that Advent is their favorite church season. And I think it's because something in marking this powerful liturgical time is resonating

with a deep truth about how we experience life: joyful anticipation marred with anxiety. During this season we hear about how this world is a not-so-perfect place, how judgment is coming, and redemption is needed, and then, rejoice in the lord. Rejoice in the Lord Always, again I say Rejoice. This dissonant message is like the liturgical equivalent of a singer screaming through the car radio while stuck in some snowy cold December traffic, exhorting us “Have a holly jolly Christmas; it’s the best time of the year” And society and climate (in this hemisphere at least) seem to match this advent tension. It’s getting darker and colder, we have companies and advertisements that are trying to get us to buy more and get that must have the gift that will make Christmas perfect. We have Christmas parties, dinners, office get-togethers. There are elves of the shelf, and then, of course, there is Instagramming said elves. These added obligations and burdens would add a little more stress to anyone’s life and to top it off we have to be holly and jolly, merry and bright because it’s the most wonderful time of the year.

Now let me be clear, if you do love the holiday’s and it is the most wonderful time of year for you, and things are merry and jolly, I am not trying to rain on your parade. It’s like that wonderful collect in Evening prayer that begins “Keep watch dear lord...” where we pray to shield the joyous. It's important that there a joyous people who love the holidays. I’m simply saying that that might not be all of us. There may be some who don’t feel up to bearing the burdens of the societal holiday season all while being jolly. And while the tension of anxiety and joy may be similar in society's expression of the holiday season and the church’s season of

Advent. There is one crucial difference. Society is telling us to be happy, and the church is telling us to be Joyful.

Henri Nouwen writes "Joy is not the same as happiness. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God's love for us. We are inclined to think that when we are sad, we cannot be glad, but in the life of a God-centered person, sorrow and joy can exist together . . . Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing — sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death — can take that love away."

So what are we to do in this Advent and holiday season tension? We pause, and breathe, and wait. We sit in the tension and use this season as an opportunity to reflect and simplify. The Gospel reading today invites us into this practice as simplifying as a way of rejoicing. When reflecting on today's gospel lesson, Barbara Brown Taylor invites to imagine what a Christmas pageant from the Gospel of John would look like. She writes "a Christmas pageant based on the fourth gospel would feature one child, speaking one line in front of a curtain of black velvet: 'and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father's only son, full of grace and truth.'" You see in the Gospel of John the mystery of the incarnation is stripped down to its essence. No shepherds or angels, no innkeeper or mangers, or wise men, or friendly beasts. Just the Word that became flesh.

In the same way, we have John, in other gospels his title is related to what he does (the baptist or the baptizer) or who's family he is a part of (son of Zechariah)

but in this Gospel, he is simply a man named John. And quickly the priest and Levites, that is the socio-religious establishment at the time, wanted to figure out who exactly this man named John was. They wanted to put him in their box. I am not the Messiah, Are you Elijah? I am not. Are you a prophet? I am not. With John, we need to heed this voice calling from the wilderness. The modern Pharisees try to put us in our holiday box. Are you merely a consumer trying to buy the best gift? I am not. Are you only trying to be a perfect (father/son/daughter/mother/grandparent/cousin) trying to make the family happy this Christmas? I am not. Are you simply a Christmas party planner and host? I am not. I am not. I am not. I am not. And while none of these things are bad in their own right when we start to let these holiday expectations define us we need to pause. Breath. Wait. And reflect on what we are not. For with each, I am not. We create the space for the I AM. The I AM that was present before the foundation of the earth was laid. The I AM that flared up in a burning bush. The I AM that spoke through prophets. The I AM that was made flesh and dwelt among us. The I AM bread, the light, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection, the way, the truth, the life, the true vine. The I AM, that risen and living Christ who dwells in each and every one of us, and who together make up the body. With each I am not, we remember who we are in Christ.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice.