

Advent 3—Year B  
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
Psalm 126  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24  
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Does anybody know what this **Third Sunday of Advent** is called? (*pause*) **Gaudete Sunday**. It's Latin for "*rejoice*". And all throughout our scriptures, we hear this call to *rejoice*. **Isaiah** is in touch with it. The **psalmist** is in touch with it. **St. Paul** is in touch with it. And in his own way, **the writer of John's gospel** is in touch with.

So far in **Advent**, we've had **apocalyptic, tumultuous** images. "*Signs of endings all around us,*" we have sung more than once. We've talked about **God doing some major earthwork in the landscape of our souls, rearranging our geography and that of the world**. But *today, today*, we move in a different direction. *Today* is all about *joy*.

**Isaiah** is no stranger to hard times—he'd lived through **the exile of his people**—and yet, he can speak of **good news, healing, liberty, release**. He can speak of **comfort**, and **the year of the Lord's favor, the year of jubilee**. Amidst **ashes**, he speaks of **garlands**. He talks of **the oil of gladness** instead of **mourning, the mantle of praise** instead of **a faint spirit, oaks of righteousness**—gosh, what a beautiful, solid, grounded image! He sees **repaired cities** amidst **ruins and devastations**. **Isaiah** knows what it is to be **clothed with salvation**, to be **wrapped in wholeness**, to **wear a robe of righteousness**. He believes with every fiber of his being that this **righteousness will spring up before the nations**, just as the **earth brings forth its shoots and the garden causes what is sown to spring up again**. Dear people of God, that's *joy*; that's *joy* through and through.

And the **psalmist** *also* knows **the hard times of exile**, and yet, the **psalmist** *also* believes that **those who sow tears will reap with songs of joy; and those who go out weeping carrying the seed, carrying only their hope, they will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves, the harvest of what they've planted. Joy.**

And **Paul** just can't contain himself; it spills out all over the place as he writes the **Thessalonians: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.**

**May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.**

*I might add given our flu and cold outbreak this week, some extra **sanctification and body being kept sound** would be great right about now.*

Paul envisions this experience of being able to **rejoice always**, no matter what; *the capacity to be grateful* and **give thanks in all circumstances**. The capacity to know that **the Spirit's fire is always burning**, and we can **hold fast to what is good**. **Our spirit and souls and body can be kept sound**, and the **God of peace consecrates us with peace**. Wow.

And in the **gospel**, we hear this: **There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. John knows who he is *and* who he isn't. He isn't the Messiah; he isn't Elijah; he isn't a prophet. He understands that "[He is] the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.**

And sometimes, that **voice of one crying out in the wilderness**, that **way of the Lord that needs to be made straight**, is the **voice** who can proclaim "**joy**" amidst all that feels messed up; who can show us that *the way of the Lord is indeed the way of joy*.

As people of faith, I know we talk a lot about *what is hard*, and *what is amiss in this world*, and *what needs to be transformed*. And we do this because our *scriptures*, and our *baptismal vows*, and *the Living Christ* consistently call us to check-in with our lives and the life of the world and see where we're living out of alignment with the way of God, and *in those places where we're out of whack*, to **repent and return to the Lord**. But lately, I've wondered if part of that **repentance** needs to be about *how we aren't claiming joy*. Are we allowing ourselves to drop down into **joy** and **gratitude** and **thanksgiving** because *these* are essential ingredients to living a life of **light** and **hope for the long haul**? That's why yesterday was so good for us. My gosh, what a service of **joy** and **day of delight**! We needed to remember what it is to *pull-out-all-the-stops* and *celebrate* and *throw ourselves full-on into joy*.

In looking up the exact translation of **Gaudete**, I found this: "**Theologian Henri Nouwen described the difference between joy and happiness. While happiness is dependent on external conditions, 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.'** Thus joy can be present even in the midst of sadness."

And Pope Francis, in his *2014 Gaudete Sunday Sermon*, said **that Gaudete Sunday is known as the "Sunday of joy," and that instead of fretting about "all they still haven't done to prepare for Christmas," people should "think of all the good things life has given you."** Given that *next Sunday is Christmas*, and a good many of us were out most of last week with sickness, thank you **Pope Francis** for this gentle reminder to give up the **fretting** and get on with **thinking of the goodness all around us**.

If we don't practice **joy**, how will we be able to *receive the good news that the shepherds will bring* us next Sunday evening? If we don't practice **joy**, how will we be able to *testify to the light* amidst these long winter nights, both metaphorically and literally? If we don't practice **joy**, how will we get to *the deeper waters from which God longs for us to drink* that just aren't dependent upon the externals?

This year, more than ever, we need this **Gaudete Sunday** to remind us that we were made for **joy**, *even amidst our tears*.

*It's not sweetness and light, it's deeper than that.*

This week, in this *last week of preparation* before **this birth** breaks open our hearts all over again, *dip down deeply into joy*. Drink it in, down to your deepest, deepest places. Drink it into those spaces in your being that have forgotten how to even imagine such a state. Let this joy flow all the way through you and bring rest and spaciousness to your soul. And then, join **John** in being a **voice that cries out in the wilderness** reminding everyone that *joy* is still **the way of our Lord**.

Taste it today, and tomorrow, and throughout this coming week, knowing this joy is just a *prelude* of the joy that is to come. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC  
December 17, 2017