

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We are exhorted to rejoice today. That's how we entered the church, listening to St. Paul urge us to "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*" In that way, this Sunday is just like the Sundays of the historic lectionary. They begin in the same way. We could even call it *Gaudete*, as in days past, and I could have had the Altar Guild drape our altar in the Rose paraments, signaling a little respite from all of our somber preparations.

That's rather the way life is. It's filled with the ordinary, and at times, the difficult, but punctuated with times of refreshment and joy. So it was for John the Baptist in today's Gospel. We meet him again today in our Advent preparations for the coming of our Savior, but the circumstances are totally different. There are no crowds flocking to John to hear him preach and be baptized by Him. Rather, John is in Herod's prison, and soon Herod would see to it that John's head is detached from his body. Not much to rejoice about there, it seems.

No, it doesn't seem as if John is rejoicing! It seems rather that John was having doubts. He sent his disciples to Jesus to get some answers: "*Are you the Coming One, or shall we look for another?*" And I don't think it's so odd that John was having doubts. He was human, after all, his miraculous origins and his Divine mandate notwithstanding.

It's true, John was born miraculously to Elizabeth, though she had been barren. John was promised to come in "*the spirit and power of Elijah*" (Luke 1:17). He would "*be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb*" (Luke 1:15), and his leap of faith in his mother's womb, as Elizabeth greeted the teenage "*mother of [her] Lord*" (Luke 1:43), bears witness to the fulfillment of this promise.

John's credentials are also rock solid. Jesus affirms them. John is the "*Elijah who is to come*"; he is the "*messenger [sent] before*" Jesus' coming, sent to "*prepare [His] way*"

John was always pointing the people away from himself and to Jesus. "*There is One coming after me*" John preached. "*I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie [His] sandal*" (Mark 1:7). John acknowledged, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30).

John came as the one bearing witness. Though He "*comes after me, yet He ranks before me, because he was before me*" (John 1:15). John baptized Jesus and saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove rest upon Him. And so, John began to point people to Jesus as "*the lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:32, 29).

Jesus in our Gospel also reminds us of John's character. John was no "*reed shaken by the wind*," bending to every wind of doctrine or soft-pedaling his message to Pharisee or King. John was no man in "*soft clothing ... living in [a] king's house*" that every hardship of body might bend him this way and that. John was a prophet "*and more than a prophet*." John was "*the prophet of the Most High*," come "*to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins*," through "*the tender mercy of our God*" (Luke 1: 76-78).

John was extraordinary! Indeed, of "*those born of women there has arisen no one greater*," our Lord says. And yet, we see that John was beginning to doubt himself and wonder, "Is Jesus really the One who is to come?" After all, John was flesh, and his flesh was subject to all the weakness of the flesh that mortal men have, including doubt. In that way, he was not unlike other great men of faith who doubted at times: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Peter. Apostles and prophets have doubted, and their actions bear witness to it.

Though admittedly greater than we are, John was, therefore, not unlike you and me. And doesn't that give you some comfort in the midst of your own doubts? If this "*prophet and more than a prophet*" can doubt, surely my doubts don't disqualify me from God's salvation.

For doubts do arise in us, don't they? We foolishly think to ourselves, "I'm a child of God. Therefore, I should be free of all troubles myself. My spouse shouldn't die; my children shouldn't get sick; I shouldn't become weak." After all, what's God for except to make my life as pleasant as possible? Therefore, we cry out, "Why God?" when we get into an accident, when we lose our job. "Why God?" We doubt God's goodness, or His power, when our house burns down, when we're left homeless, when we're thrown into jail, when we get a divorce, when our children are disrespectful.

We begin to doubt if Jesus doesn't live up to the expectations we have for the Messiah. This was part of John's problem, too. John was a judgment preacher. He preached the coming "*kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 3:2) and the One who would "*baptize ... with fire*" (Matt. 3:11), who would come with "*a refiner's fire*" to "*purify the sons of Levi*" (Mal. 3:2-3), who would come to separate the wheat from the chaff and "*burn [the chaff] with unquenchable fire*" (Matt. 3:12).

That's what John had been preaching. So when Jesus comes on the scene, John is confused. "Where's the fire?" he wonders. "Are you really the Christ?"

Jesus' answer to John in His doubts is the same as His answer to us in ours. What does the Scripture say? Then look at what I am doing. "*The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.*" For remember, John, in the midst of all his prophecies of judgment,

the prophet Malachi also told you “*the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings*” (Mal. 4:2), and in the midst of creeping doubts, that’s a cause of rejoicing for John and us.

We rejoice that our ultimate healing comes by way of Jesus’ own travails, His own arrest, His suffering and His cross. Even if John’s message was pushed to the background in the face of his own suffering, John knew it and preached it. Jesus was that Lamb of God; the cross became that altar upon which this Lamb was sacrificed for the sins of the world, for Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it by His cross and resurrection, for which we rejoice

This is the message that Jesus wanted John to remember and cling to. This is the message that relieves doubts in the midst of our own sufferings and cross. This is Jesus’ constant message to us in the face of our weak faith: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” Truly, it’s when we are weak that we look especially to Christ for our solace and our joy. Look to Him in your doubts. Trust in Christ. Look to the Lamb who bears your sins. Admit your weaknesses, and you will become strong in Christ. Admit that you are least in the kingdom, and, in Christ, you will become even greater than John. *For when [you are] weak, then [you are] strong*” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Then you will be content even with your “*weaknesses,*” with “*insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.*” And you with John will learn the meaning of “*Rejoice in the Lord always.*”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.