

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Last Sunday our Gospel concluded: “*Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by [John] for Herodias, his brother’s wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison*” (Luke 3:19-20). And this Sunday, we find John wallowing in that prison, in doubt about Jesus! Rejoice!

That sounds so out of place, but here we are on a Sunday that used to be called *Gaudete* — Rejoice! — and we’re decked out in rose-colored paraments, also a call to “*Rejoice!*” You’re right, if you say, we don’t always use the rose paraments or have a rose candle on the Advent wreath. That’s because in the Three Year series of texts, we’re not always encouraged to rejoice on this Third Sunday in Advent. But you heard our Introit and St. Paul’s call to “*Rejoice!*” Thus, the church says it to us today: “*Rejoice!*”

The prophet Zephaniah likewise called the faithful to “*rejoice and exult*” even as defeat of Judah and the capture of Jerusalem loomed ahead. But the prophet saw the coming of something else, something greater, and so he urged the people to “*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!*” But then we get to the Gospel, and we may wonder, “what does this mean?”

When it comes to the Gospel, you know that John was used to the difficult life of wilderness living. He was never arrayed in soft and luxurious clothing like those living in “*a king’s court.*” His was “*a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist*” (Matt. 3:4). John never sat at a king’s board of fine wine and rich foods. His meager meals consisted of “*locusts and wild honey*” (Matt. 3:4).

Nevertheless, all that was surely better than Herod’s prison as he awaited his execution, for Herod wanted him dead. It was a rather dark time in his prophetic ministry. No more crowds flocking to him to hear him preach and be baptized by him (Matt. 3:5); no more interviews by the religious elite wondering who he was (John 1:19-23); no more divine epiphanies like the dove that he witnessed coming down and remaining on Jesus after John had baptized Him (Matt. 3:16; John 1:32). John was in prison, and fatherly assurances that he was “*the prophet of the Most High*” (Luke 1:76) could not keep the doubts from creeping in. At least, that’s how I see it. “Am I really that prophet, the voice, the messenger? Is Mary’s son really the Son of God? I’ve proclaimed it since before I was born, but could I be wrong? Could I be wrong that my relative Jesus is ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?’ (John 1:29) Why must God’s prophet endure this?”

I, for one, don't have a problem with the idea that John was having doubts as he sat in prison. In fact, Satan loves to use just such circumstances to breed doubt. To be sure, *“among those born of women none is greater than John,”* but John also had flesh, and as Jesus would say to His disciples: *“the flesh is weak.”* And so He encouraged them: *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation”* (Matt. 26:41).

Satan is there to tempt us in the highs and lows of life; and who has not experienced them. St. Paul did. You know that right after Paul's exhortation to rejoice in our Epistle, he tells us: *“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need”* (Phil. 4:12). This is the life of faith: a sequence of highs and lows, of feeling blessed by God and feeling abandoned by God, of wondering about Jesus, *“Are you for real?”* or is this all a chasing after the wind (Eccl. 1:14)?

I think in this way we and John the Baptist are just alike. We struggle with our faith in dark times. At times we feel abandoned. At times we wonder “where is God” in the darkness? *“Where is my help?” “Where is my keeper?”* (Ps. 121) Like John we may wonder of Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”*

But thanks be to God, He answers us as He answered John. And His answer lightens the darkness of our hearts by His gracious visitation. Having healed many before them, Jesus said to John's disciples, *“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”* Jesus fulfills the prophetic word: *“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy”* (Isa. 35:5-6). Jesus is the One anointed for this task: *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor”* (Isa. 61:1). The Psalmist sings of Him, the Lord *“who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry, [who] sets the prisoners free; [who] opens the eyes of the blind; [who] lifts up those who are bowed down; [who] loves the righteous; [who] watches over the sojourners; [who] upholds the widow and the fatherless ...”* (Ps. 146:5-9).

Therefore, *“Praise the Lord”* (Ps. 146:10), the Psalmist concludes! And *“Rejoice and exult with all your heart,”* Zephaniah exclaims, for speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ, he says He *“is in your midst”* — by divine conception and birth He is “God with us”; He is in your midst to save you — by cross and resurrection, taking upon Himself shame to take away your reproach, weakness to strengthen

your weak hands, wrath to quiet you by His love, dereliction to open Paradise back to you, slander to open your mouths to sing His praise — to rejoice in the Lord always.

Paul would have to learn this through *“imprisonments with countless beatings,”* being *“stoned”* and *“shipwrecked”* and *“adrift at sea,”* *“in danger from rivers [and] robbers,”* danger from both Jews and *“Gentiles, danger in the city ... in the wilderness [and] at sea,”* through *“toil and hardship,”* *“hunger and thirst,”* *“cold and exposure”* (2 Cor. 11:23-27). Paul learned to rejoice through all this. John the Baptist had to learn it, too.

And it’s a hard lesson for all of us: to admit our own weakness and boast in it so that we might be strong in Christ — to believe what Jesus says, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Cor. 12:9), and in this way to show yourselves to be Christians. Trust in Christ; believe like a child, the least in the kingdom (Luke 9:47-48), yet with this kind of faith greater even than John the Baptist. And don’t be afraid in the midst of hardship, for fear produces doubt; fear drives out faith.

Don’t misunderstand. I’m not suggesting that doubt is good; not at all. I’m saying doubts are natural for our weak flesh, when troubles and thorns in the flesh assail us. But don’t let your doubts overwhelm you. Believe in Christ. Stand in His grace. Believe the gospel. Be strengthened, as John was then, in the knowledge of Christ’s gracious visitation: healing, opening, unceasing, loosing, cleansing, raising, feeding — dying, rising, loving, forgiving. Be strengthened now by His gracious visitation to you: by His encouraging word and by His sacraments. Rejoice *“in hope of the glory of God”* (Rom. 5:20). Rejoice even in the midst of your own suffering, remembering *“that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”* (Rom. 5:3-5).

Yes, rejoice on this Third Sunday in Advent; *“rejoice in the Lord, always,”* but especially rejoice as you come to the altar today. *“The Lord”* — your Savior — *“is at hand,”* there for you, to wipe away any doubts, to strengthen your faith in Christ and your fervent love toward one another.

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