

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Last Sunday our focus was more about the forerunner, John the Baptist, the messenger sent to prepare the way for Jesus. John has a prominent place in today's Gospel, too, but oh, the change! Look at your bulletin cover. Do you remember last week's? Gone is that powerful wilderness preacher gathering the multitudes around him to be baptized, to be called to repentance, and to glean a bit of wisdom from him. In view on this week's cover is the gaunt John, looking dejected, locked behind his prison bars, his wilderness voice silenced by wicked King Herod.

Last week's Gospel led us logically into today's. Thus, John's situation doesn't surprise us. Luke reported at the end of that Gospel: "*Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved 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).

It does, however, make us wonder about the theme of this third Sunday in Advent. It's called *Gaudete!* Rejoice! You heard the familiar antiphon of our introit: "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*" And Paul said that while at the same time acknowledging his own tribulation. "*I know how to be brought low.*" I have learned how to face hunger and need (Phil. 4:12). In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Zephaniah similarly urged the people to rejoice. "*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!*" And he did it, even though the LORD had declared to Zephaniah: "*I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem*" (Zeph. 1:4). So, yes, rejoice! God's people are called to rejoice, even in the face of suffering and trial.

But let's acknowledge how hard that is, even for those who have been trained up under the discipline of the Lord. Remember what Scripture says about this discipline: "*[God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*" (Heb. 12:10-11). "*It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons*" (Heb. 12:7).

John had been trained up under the Lord's discipline. He was used to the difficult life of wilderness living. He was never arrayed in the soft clothes of a life of leisure. He didn't live in luxury like those living in "*kings' courts.*" Instead, John wore "*a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist.*" He ate "*locusts and wild honey*" (Matt. 3:4), not a king's board of fine wine and rich foods.

All that may have been hard, but it was surely better than Herod's prison as he awaited his execution. Herod wanted John dead, but hadn't done it yet for fear of the people (Matt. 14:5). Nevertheless, did John's imprisonment cause doubts to rise up in John such that he sent his disciples to Jesus asking Him if He was "*the coming One*," or should they await another? Or did John send his disciples to Jesus for their sake, so that they would move on from him as forerunner to the One whose way John prepared?

I admit, I followed Luther in my former years. Luther held the latter view of the imprisoned John. Luther wrote: "This sending of his disciples amounts to John saying, Go and learn who is the true doctor and preacher. I know it well that he is the true Christ, but the people do not believe this. Therefore, you go to him and hear for yourselves from him personally, so that you will divorce yourselves from me and the entire Jewish school of thought, in order to cling to this man on whom your and the entire world's salvation depends" (*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, "Third Sunday in Advent," 5:60).

It's a nice thought, but if it was all for the sake of John's disciples, so that they would turn to Jesus and follow Him, why did he send only two and not all of them? And why did they go away after Jesus showed them His divine credentials?

Well, I've changed my mind. Sorry, Luther. I don't think you're right here. It seems to me that those disciples went back to shore up John's faith in the midst of doubts creeping in because of his circumstances . . . and because Jesus turned out to be a bit different than John himself expected and preached. Yes, Jesus was a miracle worker, as Isaiah prophesied: "*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*" (Is. 35:5-6). Jesus did all these things and more — He even raised the dead. Go and report that to John, he told John's messengers.

Yes, the Messiah would "*bring good news to the poor*" and "*bind up the brokenhearted*" and "*proclaim liberty to the captives*" (Is. 61:1). This is what Jesus preached, and what John's messengers were dispatched to report. So, was John being offended by Jesus? Did he wonder: "I'm captive. Where's my liberty?" And where is the "*vengeance of our God*" (Is. 61:2)? Remember what John preached about the coming One? "*His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*" (Matt. 3:17). This is what John expected, and this wasn't happening. I think doubts welled up in him, as they well up in us in times of tribulation.

Satan certainly doesn't give us a pass in such times; he's right there to tempt us into "false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice" — like doubt (Small

Catechism, Lord's Prayer — 6th Petition). In fact, who has not experienced temptation in such times? John the Baptist did, even he "*among [whom] those born of women none is greater.*" The disciples did, Jesus' chosen Twelve, who had witnessed many of Jesus' mighty wonders. The apostle Paul did, who was afflicted with a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan (2 Cor. 12:7).

I think in this way we, John the Baptist, Paul, and all Christians are alike. We struggle with doubts in dark times. We may feel abandoned. We may wonder "where is God" in the darkness? We may wonder of Jesus, "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" Repent, and trust in Christ Jesus.

For thanks be to God, He answers us as He answered John. He pointed John to God's promises fulfilled; they're fulfilled for us in Christ, too. He answers us as He answered the disciples. Jesus showed them His wounds. We still have Christ crucified and risen preached to us, and we still eat of the wounded Jesus and drink the blood that flows from His wounded side. He answers us as He answered Paul: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor. 12:9). His grace is sufficient for us, too, and His power is manifest in us as we repent in humility and weakness and trust in Jesus.

And in this trust, we with St. Paul can "*boast ... gladly of [our] weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon [us]*" (2 Cor. 12:9). In this trust, "*we [can] rejoice in our sufferings, knowing 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, by this Spirit, trust in Christ; believe like one of the "*least in the kingdom*" (Luke 9:47-48); be strengthened by Jesus and His ongoing visitation, even at this altar here today; and you will rejoice "*in hope of the glory of God*" (Rom. 5:20) for life everlasting. God grant it.

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