

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In December's *Voice of Zion*, I talked about the new church year we are entering, and a bit about our lectionary, that is, the assigned readings for the year. As I wrote, we use the Three-year series, and we are using the Series A set of readings this year. In the historic One-Year series of texts, this Third Sunday in Advent would be called *Gaudete*, "Rejoice" Sunday. In a nod to that Sunday, we too were exhorted to rejoice today. Our Introit began with "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*" It's why our paraments are Rose today — some call it pink, but it's supposed to be Rose.

And yet, on this "Rejoice" Sunday, we encounter John the Baptist in a decidedly unjoyful situation. John had been thrown into prison by Herod — not King Herod that we hear about in the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. That's Herod the Great; this is the tetrarch Herod, one of his sons, Herod Antipas, who ruled in Galilee.

Last Sunday, we heard how the people from "*Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to*" John (Matt. 3:5). He was popular for his preaching — yes, even for preaching repentance — and for his baptizing. But today, we find him in prison. Why? Because he had called Herod Antipas to repentance, because Herod had married "*Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,*" and "*John had been saying to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'*" So "*Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison*" (Matt. 14:3-4).

Oh, how faith is challenged when life goes badly for us! How easy it is to lose our faith. Where were You, God, when I needed You? Why didn't you answer my prayers? Are You there? How can I believe in You when You allow such things to happen? You know the questions.

It's true that when things are going well, we can become complacent, and not come to church, not pray, not read God's Word. We might become flabby in our faith, but a flabby faith doesn't so often lead to questioning God or abandoning the faith. Just the opposite under the hot sun of adversity. Jesus teaches that tender plants of faith are scorched "*by tribulation or persecution ... on account of the faith*" (Matt. 13:21), and faith withers away (Matt. 13:5-6) and dies.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist is in prison, suffering its cruelties and indignities. Still, he had heard "*about the deeds of the Christ.*" Some of John's disciples had moved on to follow Jesus after John had pointed them to this "*Lamb of God*" (John 1:35ff)! Jesus and His disciples were for a time baptizing in "*the Judean countryside*" (John 3:22), and John again pointed his disciples to Jesus — John, "*the friend of the bridegroom,*" rejoicing over "*the bridegroom*" Himself

Nevertheless, this time John sent some of his disciples to Jesus to confirm: "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" John was having doubts, perhaps even a crisis of faith. Many in the early church would not countenance such a thought, but it's more common now to admit it. I didn't want to think it about John earlier in my ministry, but now I think he was no different than you and I are. Surely he didn't just send his disciples to inquire of Jesus for their sake but for his own sake, to shore up his faith.

John did this ... he whom Jesus commends as someone not weak of mind, not easily shaken by the winds of circumstance. Indeed, how much easier it would have been for John simply to have remained silent in the face of Herod's immorality! Then he wouldn't be in this predicament. But he did not!

John was not someone accustomed to a life of luxury in king's palaces, with soft clothing and sumptuous fare. We heard it last Sunday. John lived a spartan life out in the wilderness. He "*wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist.*" His "*food was locusts and wild honey*" (Matt. 3:4).

John was a prophet, Jesus affirmed, and more than a prophet. He was the last and greatest of the prophets; he was the one given the Divine privilege of being the messenger sent to prepare the way of the Messiah and to announce His coming.

John is he about whom Jesus said "*among those born of women there has arisen no one greater.*" John was "*the Elijah*" whose coming the prophet Malachi prophesied would precede "*the great and awesome day of the LORD*" (Mal. 4:5), not Elijah in the flesh, but come "*in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,*" the angel Gabriel told John's father (Luke 1:17). And Malachi adds: "*the hearts of children to their fathers*" (Mal. 4:6).

With all that, still, the weakness of John's flesh is on display before us today in doubt and fear. What hope can there be for us? Who are we compared to John the Baptist? What have we done? How shall we be known, we ordinary Christians? Perhaps the "*least in the kingdom of heaven*"? No grandiose deeds to commend ourselves before God! No great renown! What hope is there for us?

Only Jesus' word of promise: "*the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than*" John the Baptist. You hear it all the time: trust not in your works. Trust not in your status. Look not to yourself for your salvation. Look to Jesus.

That was Jesus' answer to John amidst his doubts. That was the answer Jesus told John's disciples to deliver to John. "Tell John what you have heard and seen." "*The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf*

*hear, and the dead are raised up*” — a visible fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. And Malachi, too, prophesied: *“the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings”* (Mal. 4:2). In the midst of John’s creeping doubts, that is a cause for rejoicing.

Jesus’ answer to John is also our answer. Look to Jesus. Consider what He has said and done. Believe it and rejoice.

And, of course, we rejoice that our ultimate healing comes by way of Jesus’ own travails, His arrest, His suffering and His cross. John knew this message. He preached it himself. Jesus was the Lamb of God, sent as a sacrifice for the sins of the world; the cross upon which Jesus hung became the altar for this sacrificial Lamb, for Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it by His cross and resurrection, for which we rejoice (John 3:17).

This is the message that Jesus wanted John to remember and cling to. This is the message that relieves our 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. Let us look to Him in our doubts, in our *“weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.”* Trust in Christ and be content. Look to the Lamb who bears your sins. Admit that you are least in the kingdom, but, in Christ, you are great. In Christ, *“when [you are] weak, then [you are] strong”* (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Yes, in Christ, we can rejoice. *“Rejoice in the Lord always,”* even *“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”* to call us to faith and to keep us in this true faith (Rom. 5:3-5).

Christ is our salvation. Therefore, *“Again, I will say, rejoice.”*

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