

Advent III – December 17

The Third Sunday of Advent is often called the Joy Sunday and the Candle is labeled “rejoice.” Its Latin name was always “Gaudate” from the first word of the Introit for the day. Gaudate is the Latin imperative “rejoice!”

Is God joyful? I think to say anything else of God is to diminish him somehow. If he is sad he must be lacking something. Joy seems to be the emotive word to describe perfection and God is perfect. I have heard it said that you will become like the God you worship. If your god is a severe judge, you will become severe and judgmental. If you believe God is grumpy, you will become grumpy. Conversely, if you believe God to be the very essence of Joy, then you will become joyful yourself. We often imagine that God’s joy is robbed by our sinfulness. But isn’t that imaging that our sins are so important that they would affect cosmic joy? Indeed, God cares for us and he is not pleased with sin, but I don’t know if the entire world’s rebellion could truly have taken his joy away. He willingly gave it up that we might be restored to Joy, but I don’t think you can say that our sins deprived him of Joy necessarily. He voluntarily went to the cross and laid down his life. Hebrews tells us he did this for the joy set before him.

The point of the incarnation could be said that God wanted to bring us all back into the hearty joy which he has all the time. Jesus’ sorrow was his sacrifice so that we might have joy. That renewed relationship with God, established by Christ, imparted by the work of the Spirit, who gives us God’s real joy.

It is also worth noting that sometime in this week falls Dec. 17 every year. This year it falls on this day and so one might want to focus on it. Dec. 17 marks the beginning of the octave of days prior to Christmas, whose special antiphons we know better as the verses of that favorite hymn of this season: “Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel” (Which coincidentally may be the longest title for a hymn whose every word is properly separated by a comma.) Within the monastic communities the feast of the Incarnation is anticipated by these ancient verses which call for Emmanuel, the Key of David, etc., to come.

The Sundays of Advent can be seen as an exploration of the emotions of the Church as we wait for the day our Lord’s revealing on that last day. The first Sunday is hope as we look forward to it. The second Sunday is a strong measure of a healthy fear of the Lord as the readings speak of judgment. The third Sunday is joy. The arrival or revelation of Christ is also an occasion for joy. This emotion marks the Christian experience. Our God is joyful, he delights in his creation, he takes joy in his people and the work of His Son, Jesus, the Christ. That joy even finds its way into a penitential season like Advent. As we wait for Christ it is with a measure of joyful expectation.

I can really relate to this. as a young child, my eldest siblings all went out of state to school at Synodical high schools, first in Seward, Nebraska, and then to Concordia, Missouri. That made Advent particularly anticipatory as we waited for them to come home.

There is a joy to waiting. It sounds counter-intuitive to a society which delights in immediate gratification. We have this self-understanding that waiting is the same as self-deprivation and cannot understand why anyone would want to wait. But this hardly explores the entirety of the waiting role for Christians. Waiting of itself can be a very good thing and even a joyful thing.

I also think of a recurrent metaphor for the Christian expectation of the end of time, the metaphor of a pregnant woman. The day when labor is in several places likened to the end of the world. But if you have ever had the experience of being there with your wife or with a parishioner through the time of waiting which is a pregnancy, fear is not the only emotion a woman feels; although, it is certainly one of the emotions, especially as she considers the time of labor. The mother who has been waiting for nine months for this child feels a measure of joy when the labor pangs begin. She is about to welcome a new life into her arms and home. She is about to hold this baby in a different way, to look into his or her eyes and get to know this little person who has grown inside her womb. She is also about to be done with the physical discomfort of the last trimester of pregnancy. Carlos Winterle, a recipient of these notes, tells me that the Portuguese phrase for a woman giving birth is: *A mulher deu à luz uma criança* = the woman gave to light a child. Carlos is a Brazilian Lutheran who also serves in South Africa.

The Bible at several points likens our waiting to that of a woman who looks forward to the birth of her child. The person who is waiting for the last day is not only waiting for the end of the world, but also the revealing of a new life. The end of the world is not the end, just as the end of a pregnancy is not really the end but in a much larger sense the beginning of something. The dying of this world is not to enter some vacuum or a mindless Nirvana in which we lose all our personality. The ending of this world is the revelation of heaven, of eternal life, of the fuller and more joyful life which we have on promise from Christ himself.

Of course, since the season focuses on the events of Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus, this metaphor is eminently sermon worthy in this season. While the Bible records nothing of it, one has to wonder about the emotions of that young peasant girl, Mary, as she carried this infant in her womb and as her labor pangs came upon her. Fear, certainly, but also joy.

This brings us to a little discussion of the character of joy as well. Joy is not quite the same thing as happiness. I think that a woman who holds that child in her arms has joy, even though there is considerable pain at that moment. The brick mason who after a long day turns around and sees the straight wall he has just built feels joy despite the complaints of his back and the weariness of his muscles. Perhaps the more pertinent image is the joy of an addict who has been liberated from the tyranny of the drug or alcohol which formerly gripped them. They are still an addict, they are still subject in one sense, but in another real sense, this day which is drug free is a precious day to be enjoyed simply for what it is.

Happiness, as most folks use the word, often involves a perfect situation. But let it rain on our picnic or ants invade our egg salad sandwich and the happiness can evaporate. Joy, on the other hand, is often found only amid aching back and painful experiences. It is much more durable and

cannot be taken away by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, at least not by things like pain or certain suffering. I think of Paul writing his essay on joy in the letter to the Philippians from a prison cell.

I admit that I use these words too rigidly here. Many also use the word happiness as I use joy and some use the word joy as I have described happiness, so you cannot go too far with this. But I think that the two concepts have merit as a distinction in a sermon and certainly in the mind of the preacher as he carefully considers the third week of Advent.

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

What does a dark hearted person look like? When I posed this question before, our first thoughts were of guilt and sin. The person who has a great guilt about something might well feel darkened. How do we actually get rid of that old sin which darkens us? Do we believe that an absolution actually removes the sin which obscures the light?

But we also wondered about folks who live in a hopeless darkness. The situation, political or economic, is simply not going to change. They don't know where this can go. This too is darkness.

What about the person who has a darkness which they don't recognize as darkness. What if they think they are in the light? We spoke of someone who was dabbling in dark things and their life had become much darker since that dalliance had begun. Living in the darkness changes our perspectives, our behaviors. Something goes out of our life. The darkness obscures not only our everyday deeds, but the darkness also means we cannot see our goal, and we might unwittingly progress on a very dangerous path.

What about the person whose family is darkened, either through abuse or grief? This too could be a darkness which needs Jesus' light. The woman who is afraid of her husband or the child who is neglected also has a "darkness" which needs lightening.

"Lighten the darkness of our hearts by your gracious visitation." I really like this prayer. Jesus is the light of the world and when he comes the darkness lifts. There are all sorts of darkness in the world and that metaphor really works. The darkness can be the darkness of fear or pain. It can be a darkness of ignorance or sickness. It can be depression or anxiety, it can be the darkness of abuse or poverty. As we explore above, there are all sorts of possibilities here. Jesus comes to shine on all of them.

Now, when the light shines, the cockroaches all scurry into the dark cracks and the thorough treatment of the darkness will often involve some extermination as well. But that is what we were talking about last week. This is about turning on a light in a dark place so we can see it, so that the shadows can be driven back and the place can have some cheer. By this point we are lighting

the third of our Advent candles and the chancel is starting to get brighter. Of course, I also remember it starting to get hotter! Don't put that thing too close to the tree or you may have a lot more light than you were looking for!

Light is a great metaphor for preaching this joy. We tend to be afraid of the dark but when the lights turn on, then the things of which we were afraid often turn out to be something silly. Likewise we can think of that child coming into the light of day from the darkness of the womb in which he or she has been nourished.

Jesus comes and sheds his light on the darkness of the world. His ministry of healing and service in Galilee was certainly a light shedding sort of event. Think about all the ways that he shed light today:

- 1. Jesus healed the sick – in Portland, if you are sick you will still go to places which bear his name or the names of his servants: Emanuel Hospital, Providence, St. Vincent's, etc.*
- 2. Casting out Demons - Exorcisms still happen*
- 3. Removing Fear (calming the storm) – Have you ever sat beside someone going into surgery and had them look in your eyes and know that they are really glad you are there?*
- 4. Welcoming sinners (parables of lost sheep, coins, sons) This is what churches are supposed to be doing, isn't it?*
- 5. Feeding the hungry (feeding of the 5000) If you are hungry in this city you will likely find something to eat at a Christian run homeless shelter and/or foodbank*
- 6. Befriending the lonely (The woman at the well) This is what LWML and Small Group Ministries, and much of what we do is supposed to be about.*
- 7. Raising the dead – This one seems to be a Jesus only sort of event.*
- 8. Helping the foreigner (Canaanite woman) Hospitality to the person who has moved to town, the mission to the African émigrés or the Latino mission, etc.*
- 9. Teaching – not only the teaching of the Bible and the things of faith, but also just teaching math, literature, and the rest.*
- 10. Missions – Sharing the good news with folks – domestically and abroad.*
- 11. GoFundMe projects – is there a place where you have seen the Spirit blowing in an individual's life? Is that the lightening of Jesus work?*

More?

A look at that list also reveals that those things, except perhaps for the resurrection of the dead, are still happening today through the ministry of Christ's people. Hospitals still often bear Christian names, sinners are welcomed and forgiven, hungry people are fed in many Christian shelters this morning and through food banks. The outcast and the foreigner are often find their only helping hand, an embrace, or a smile in a building with a cross on top.

Jesus visits his people today. *He visits us this morning in absolution and sacrament, and through us this week he visits this world, shedding his gracious light through the love, kindness, sweetness, and gentleness which we have received from his hands and now pass along to our neighbors. Joy is best not something that we hold in, but something that we share.*

Today we might just preach about God bringing the light of Christ which dispels the darkness and allows us to live in the light. The way of darkness, for instance, is that when someone hurts me, I get even, I wreak vengeance upon that other human being. It doesn't shed any light, if anything it makes things darker. But if I live in the light of Christ, if he shines in my heart, then I forgive the sinner, and the darkness is dispelled, and I am in the light. That is the tangible presence of Christ in this world, it brings Joy.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 *This chapter is brief and I have given you the entire passage for your consideration.*

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
⁵ *Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks;
foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;*
⁶ *but you shall be called the priests of the LORD;
they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
and in their glory you shall boast.*
⁷ *Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion;
instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot;*

*therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion;
they shall have everlasting joy.*

⁸ For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

⁹ Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed.

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.

Hebrew is a strange and wonderful language. It has something which one of my Seminary Profs called “the blessed Hiphil” which is the Hebrew causative stem – a whole verb form dedicated to the idea that someone can cause the verb to happen. God causes righteousness to spring up here. I don’t have to cause it, I don’t have that ability, but God does and he causes it to spring forward and upward in my life, despite me. But causing it to happen doesn’t preclude another’s participation in that event. If God causes righteousness to spring up in me, it is in me. There is excellent Gospel in that concept.

The people of Israel, prior to the Exile, had frequently been compared to a faithless spouse. Hosea is the most accessible example. Isaiah here, and elsewhere, seems to be speaking of a forensic virginity restored to them. They had betrayed the covenant and normally in a marriage once the trust is broken it is almost impossible to restore. The marriage may survive but it is never really the same. Isaiah seems to speak of a newly created situation. God the creator is making this reality anew, they are dressed like the bride. God rejoices over them again like a bridegroom and we are given to rejoice in God once more. He causes righteousness to sprout, he dresses us in the robe of righteousness, the garments of salvation.

When God says he forgives us, he never has his fingers crossed behind his back. He never hedges his bets. He never says “I forgive you, but...” or “I forgive you if...” God just says “I forgive.” And he means it. He really means it. That is how interested he is in our joy.

Isaiah wrote these words to discouraged people and discouraged people will find in them great comfort. The proud, comfortable, and self-assured may not like what he has to say so much.

Isaiah speaks of the great reversal which is the kingdom of God. Jesus takes the little child and puts him at the top of the kingdom. Jesus turns the world upside down. Isaiah sees the day when the powerful of the world get their comeuppance. The little guys who have been stepped on will be called blessed on that day.

In Isaiah's terms the prisoners are released and those who mourn have traded in their sack cloth and ashes for party dresses and tuxedos. Those who have been forced to wait upon the foreigners will find those foreigners out there tending their flocks. The wrongs will all be righted because God loves justice and hates iniquity and unfairness.

In verse, 10, the prophet, or perhaps the Israelite, gives voice as the things promised are delivered. He dons the festive garment and shouts for joy. This is not just a t-shirt and a pair of shorts either. This is the high end garment. If you preach this, don't forget that her wedding dress is likely one of the most expensive garments most of the women in your parish have or will ever wear. God puts us in beautiful garments which bring praise to his name.

Then, in a complete metaphor switch, he jumps to an agricultural metaphor to describe what God has done. It is like the sprouting of a seed. Before the days of genetics and microbiology, this was a great mystery to the ancients and still is for anyone who gardens. You put this hard little thing that looks for the world like it is dead into the ground. A little time, water, warmth and sunshine later suddenly you have a growing thing.

This is what God has done. It should not work, at least it doesn't look like it should work but God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. It does work, it works marvelously. The microbiologist will agree that this is a wonder. He or she may indeed understand the processes better than I do, but the mystery is still there. It is often for the partially initiated that the mystery seems to be lost. No, it is isn't "magic" but it might just be something better. It might be genetics, an equally wonderful insight and equally attributable to God.

Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

³ The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!

⁵ Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!

⁶ He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

This Psalm of course was written by the people of God after they returned from their exile. Their joy almost put them in a stupor. They were like men and women in a dream, it seemed surreal. They sing the songs which Isaiah had been telling they would sing (look at Isaiah 25:9 and others for examples)

But then the psalmist in the second part seems to revert. What is going on here? The returning exiles faced a disappointment as well. They had thought it would be a repeat of Moses and the Exodus and it was very different and not at all what they expected. Nehemiah and Ezra and others faced tough times. The Greeks, the Romans and other conquerors dominated the land. The kingdom of David was not in fact restored politically.

Likewise, our prayer for healing might be answered, but if the cancer is cured, won't a heart attack get me eventually? My child might be safely brought home through a blizzard only to tell me that he is dropping out of school and joining a commune. This side of that last day, even the visitation of Jesus in a profound way is a temporary fix to permanent problems. The Christian delights in the visitation of God as the Psalmist did and yet also looks forward to the fullest-fulfillment of all of God's promises in Christ. We look forward to that day when every tear is wiped away and all the reproach of the people is taken from us. We look forward to the thing which Jesus does on that last day.

We call this whole concept the "Now and Not Yet" We live in the time when we can say that we have eternal life, yet we die, we are perfect and yet we experience sin in our lives. The darkness reigns in us and yet we can also confess that we are in the light. This reality lives together in the Christian. We are in a sense of two minds in this. Heaven is when the not yet part is realized and there is no more of the old clinging to us, but for now, we have both things to say for we are all sinner and saint, immortal and mortal. Preaching the joy is preaching the immortality, and the saintliness. It is a looking away from the darkness, from the sinner and the mortality.

Repentance can be seen in more than one way. In Hebrew, repent simply means to turn around. We turn from death to life, we turn from the brokenness wrought by the fall into sin toward the eternal life which Christ has won on the cross. This is how we can have penitential joy.

I Thessalonians 5:16-24 this is the concluding verses of this book, so I have taken it all the way to end and given you a little context before our verses.

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

²⁵ Brothers, pray for us.

²⁶ Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

²⁷ I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

The phrase in the middle of our reading (vs 17) needs some attention. Any time we hear of the will of God our human nature wants to make that into Law. We are supposed to rejoice all the time, pray all the time, and be thankful all the time. This is God's will. Gulp! I have not done that. I have failed the will of God.

This will be the default position of our hearers. They are right of course, but the preacher, who is interested in this text will need to help them see these imperatives as descriptors of the righteousness that God causes to spring up (OT lesson). He wants this, so he does it. Like seeds in the ground, God causes this righteousness to spring up.

Of course the other real sermon in this text is in the last verse. Notice who keeps us blameless and pure on that last day, it isn't me! It rather connects to "the blessed Hiphil" in the prior reading. God causes the righteousness to spring. That is not to say that this is a license to sin, just look at the preceding verses, but the confidence which I have on the last day is not located in my ability to do any of those things, it is located in the redeeming and purifying work of God. We tend to get so wrapped up in what we are doing and often we don't just count on Him to keep his promises. We will grow the church with the right program or parking or building. This is hard to trust and we often fail at it. This sends us right back to the beautiful truth of what this text says – we won't get this right, he will keep the promise, he will cause the righteousness to spring up. This is deeply embedded in a doctrine of sanctification. On Christ's day, we will be held blameless and we will see that perfection and righteousness with our own two eyes in everything we say and do.

Paul seems to enjoin the impossible. To rejoice always, to pray always, to give thanks in every circumstance, these seem like impossible things to do and they actually seem to be at odds with other places in the Bible. After all, the person who says he doesn't have time to help a hungry woman because he has to go and pray has something out of order in his spiritual priorities. Isn't that what Jesus said in depicting the priest and Levite who hurry past the man who was lying half dead beside the road in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When confronted by evil or suffering, I am not sure that affecting an attitude of rejoicing is what is called for. Even Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

So what does Paul mean? One can read this to mean that these things are always part of the Christian life, even though every moment is not devoted to rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving. That would mean that a person who is a Christian never really loses their joy, always finds something to give thanks for, and is every day returning to the posture of prayer. That is probably the best take on this.

One can also find, especially in the prayer, but in the thanksgiving and joy as well, another way to think about this. The monks of the Benedictine tradition especially but also some others as well, tend to see their whole life as a form of prayerful rejoicing and giving thanks. Indeed Luther's doctrine of vocation is really rooted in this understanding. So, the act of feeding the hungry woman I noted above is way to pray to God and to give thanks to them. Mother Theresa in some of her more profound comments seems to have seen her ministry to the poor of Calcutta that way.

Do not quench the spirit. I am not sure that this is the best text to preach ten days before Christmas, but there is an important thing to say here. Dickens seems to have ruined that for us with his "Christmas Carol" and the spirits of Christmas that Scrooge was quenching. But even with that bracketed out, the Spirit seems to be the Holy Spirit and he is quenchable! That means that the Spirit of God, while powerful, does not work in a way which is only defined by power, otherwise he would not be quenchable. He is a gentle Spirit, who cooperates with the redeemed man or woman and can be ignored or quenched from the decision making and life living processes of the person. Paul says, "don't do that!"

The Christian life is lived open to that Spirit. He is not contained in the boxes we like to construct for God. He works in ways which are sometimes surprising to us and among people who are surprising to us. Sometimes in the more difficult days, in the tough times, we are given to experience the Spirit working profoundly. But there is a warning here as well. We can ignore Him.

Is prophecy preaching? The prophets of old did a lot of what we would call preaching. A prophet was both a foreteller and a forth-teller. He told the future. I don't do much of that except in proclaiming the promises of God. But I do much more of the forth-telling, that is the authoritative discussion of what I see right in front of me. God does have some things to say about that.

Don't despise the prophecies, but don't be stupid either. Test them. Hold them up to the light of day, to the light of Scripture. If they are worthy, listen to them, if they are not, flee from them. You have real decisions to make, and you can make real decisions about the evil in the world. You don't have to go there. It takes many forms and can creep into anyone's life. The redeemed man, empowered by the Spirit of God, can make at least some wise decisions. He may not, indeed will not, always make the right choice, but thanks to the arrival of Christ and the outpouring of His Spirit, he can at least make some right decisions.

God will see to the final purity of your life. That is not what we are talking about here, but the light of Christ can shine meaningfully and truly in your life right now this day.

Quenching the Spirit – too much negativity. Isn't it amazing that I can always hear the one word the lay reader mispronounces and do not pay attention to the 300 that he or she properly pronounced?

Quenching the Spirit – I think this also plays when we serve out of a sense of duty and not out of the joyful and thankful gratitude toward the redeemer of my life. Service can become a drudgery which saps the joy right out of my life and I start to hate church as a result. Can we say that nothing we do is so important that it is worth taking away someone's joy? What if Sunday school did not happen this week? What if a position is unfilled? Does the kingdom of God stop? Do we take too much to our selves by suggesting that this has to be done? If we cannot find someone willing to be treasurer, should we just cough up the money for a book keeper?

John 1:6-8, 19-28

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given

through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

We thought that this next verse was unfortunately omitted. John's witness to the light, which we read about in the first verses of our text, really begins here. He points to Jesus and declares that he is the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

What is John pointing us and our hearers to see this day? We anticipate Christmas and the same one who was born in that manger coming again on the last day. He tells us that Jesus is light for dark lives (see the OT and Collect). Do we look for light? What darkness does Jesus dispel? If Jesus walked the earth today as he did then, what darkness would he dispel? When he comes in glory, what darkness will flee before him on that day? Depression? Sadness? Loneliness? Unbelief or Misbelief or Disbelief? Too often Christians can only imagine that Jesus comes to deal with the naughtiness (Santa Claus = Jesus). But looking at Jesus' ministry we see him dealing with those things. Is he far more interested in our hurt than he is in our sinfulness?

Is John's emphasis on Jesus as the light also helpful here? We put lights on our house. We light candles. We focus on light quite a bit in this season. Is that a homiletical handle for us.

Are the Pharisees and their emissaries in this text really in the dark? (Picking up the Collect's metaphor and one which John uses extensively.) Are they really impeding the progress of this kingdom? Do they present a preachable moment here?

We wondered where this text applied to folks today. Do we need our lives straightened out? Undoubtedly! John points to Jesus and he stands among the people. They don't know him, but he is right there in the midst of the people who don't know him. Isn't that really our joyful task? We don't bring Christ to the nations. He is already there. We point to him, we notice him, we delight in him and we sing his praises to the people who are blindly looking but never finding. He is

right there, their search is over. Of course, the first order of business here is probably to address the folks who sit in pews and don't really notice that Jesus is there.

More John the Baptist – this time from John. The repentance message is still there, sharply spoken again, but this time John seems to speak of John also as a witness, the one who points to Christ. Here we actually get a little more of the repentance message from John. The leaders of the Jews come out there and query him about who he really is. Is he Elijah or the Christ or the Prophet? (Moses had told them to expect a prophet who would come after him – some in the time of Jesus thought this was a sort of super-prophet, a singular individual. This would actually translate into Islam and they would consider Mohammad to be the fulfillment of that prophecy.) John's response is emphatic. He is none of those things; instead, he is the preparation, the voice in the wilderness crying out to make straight the way for the king who is to come.

One could preach the joy of Advent as the people who have heard that message of John the Baptist and are engaged in that preparatory work, both in terms of personal reform and larger or communal reform. This is to give energy to the reforming impulse. Everyone can see that something has to be done with their own life and the world. But the energy is often lacking. Like the overweight person who knows that they have to shed some pounds, the willpower is lacking when the Christmas cookies are sitting on the table.

What the arrival of Jesus does for the Christian is to give a sense of urgency and energy to the reforming act. If I am doing this for myself, then so what? But if I am doing for the king who is to come, who is coming to my life, then it gets a little more punch. Think of cleaning before guests arrive, think of making a meal for a friend who is coming over, think of lovingly wrapping a gift for someone that you cherish. Those things might be drudgery and might not even get done, but for the guest, for the friend, for the loved one, they become a pleasure, even a joy to do.

The Christian who wrestles with sin, who feeds the hungry, or comforts a grieving neighbor, has a completely different feel for those things than someone who does it for a living. We do it because we are alive. The living has already been given, it is simply our life, and it is a joy to us. Whenever we are about the light-shedding work of Christ, whether that is in our own disciplines of prayer and worship and giving thanks or whether it is in the communal disciplines of loving and serving our neighbor, this is not the imposition of something that is "good for us" in the same way that exercise and the right diet is good for us. This is getting up to run in the morning and eating the right things because we love life and we love our families and we want to spend that time with them.

Law

1. There are many things which suck the joy out of life. It seems like such a fragile and fleeting sort of a thing. There are so many reasons to be fearful, sad, and morose. These things seem so real and so oppressive, joy is so ephemeral.

2. Some of those joy suckers are inside me, some are outside of me and I am unable to say which ones are worse. My sins wreak terrible darkness in my life, but as I look around me, I can see others who are even worse off. My heart may be heavy with my own guilt, but when I look into the hollow eyes of a prostitute or a drug addict or a homeless man, I see something even darker than I have ever experienced.
3. One of the greatest impediments to joy is the fact that the things that I am supposed to do seem like such drudgery. Sometime the committees and boards of church can seem that way too! The appeal is in the forbidden fruit, the off-limits activity. The grass is always greener, it seems, on the other side of the fence. My taste buds seem particularly sensitive to the pleasures of sugar and fat, while they recoil from the whole grains and the high fiber which the doctors tell us we should be eating. I am hard-wired for unhealthy things and that seems to be the only way I can really be happy. I am just not cut out to be a fasting monastic sort of person.
4. When something good does happen, I can always find something that is not so good about it. Why is it that when the reader on Sunday morning stumbles on one word, I pay attention to that instead of the 300 words she read correctly?
5. There is a lot of darkness in the world – the product of our own sin and the corruption of everything. It is especially hard when we realize God made it good and now it is ruined. The hungry are hungrier this year. The poor seem to be poorer. The wars go on and on. We don't seem to be any closer but indeed seem farther away from heaven.

Gospel

1. Joy has a strength which derives not from where I find myself right now, but from the reality and the truth of God. It may seem like this world is more real to my eyes and senses, but that is the lie which my enemy has spoken and Jesus has smashed it with the light of his truth. He comes to raise the dead, heal every disease, free every soul captive to drugs or alcohol or some other tyrant. He loves what is right and good, and he brings blessings with himself so that every man and woman and child may sing his praises. Even the grave has not stymied his good work.
2. Jesus has come to contend with all the sources of darkness. The darkness tried to snuff out his infant life, but God would not let that happen and the holy family was led to Egypt and safety. He did not swerve from his goal until he conquered the darkness on a Friday we call Good, when the sky went dark and his body was laid in a dark tomb. It seemed the end, but the light of Easter tells us all that there is no darkness which his light does not overcome.
3. The fall has indeed worked its terrible work on me. But that is not the end of the story. Jesus also has been and continues to be at work in me. He made me in the first place and

his life blood shed on a cross has now redeemed me. I am doubly his. My unhealthy appetites, my desire for what is wrong, this does not disqualify me for heaven, but qualifies me for his redemptive and re-creative work. I am the very sort of person he came to save and today, bit by bit, little by little, he is working that good work in me. It is a work he will bring to completion on the last day, but I can know something of it today. There is joy in clean living too. It is a lie of Hollywood that healthy marriages are boring or that a life without the abuse of drugs is somehow unfulfilled. My eyes may have to be opened, but he can do that too.

4. Much of His work in my life involves re-directing my vision. Yes, terrible disasters happen, but when the house burns down, the neighbors pull together and something beautiful happens. If I look only at the charred remains of my house I might miss the love and care of the neighbors. Jesus shines his light on this as well and redirects my vision for the living of this life right now, giving me joy in the context of sadness, and turning my sorrow into praise for him.
5. The redemption of my life and the redirection of my vision in turn creates in me the ability to be a light source for this darkened world. I am not creating this light, but reflecting it from Him. Greater darkness is not a discouragement to me, because the responsibility for the light is His, not mine, in fact, darker days can be seen as an opportunity for me. I have light, and even if my light is sometimes feeble, it is welcome in darkness by those who suffer without the light.

Sermon Ideas *We thought the preacher had a real difficult task this day. There are just so many sermons possible out these wonderful texts. The preacher needs to find the darkness in his parish and preach to enlightening that.*

1. Advent Joy (Epistle: That the hearer would joyfully anticipate the coming of Christ, both now in the ministry of His people, and on that last day.)

Jesus comes. Does that make us glad? He comes right now, he comes on that last day, present here and there, he comes to deal with every darkness and every hurt, including the hearts made dull by affluence (influenza) and those whose joy has become muted by sorrows of every kind. If you have a hard time ginning up some joy in the Christmas season, if your inner Scrooge is finding expression in your life, there is hope and good news. Jesus is coming and he brings us joy. Today, he lifts from us the burden of our sins and the fear which lies so sullenly over us. He dresses us in the robe of righteousness, the garment of gladness. He causes righteousness to spring up like seeds in a garden. And one day, he will lift from us every burden and every sorrow and our lives will be freed. So today and that day we join the psalmist in singing the praises of our God, like men and women in a dream. We don the festive garment and stand in awe of the miracle of what God has done. God has reconnected us to the blessedness which was lost in the fall. The

Son has come and revealed the Father, and John's call to us is to turn toward that light. The preacher may want to speak of his own joy this day. We are witnesses to the light as well. We rejoice, not because our lives have always been free of darkness, pain, loneliness, and sorrow, but because Christ has lifted that darkness, shone in our lives. Often he does that through people, just like the ones you see sitting in front of you.

The preacher will want to address the prescriptive/descriptive distinction we made under the notes in the Epistle section above. The will of God is that we have persistent joy, thanksgiving and prayer. He doesn't demand it, he gives it.

This sermon might be just the ticket for the weary congregation. But it might also really frightening for your leadership. If you proclaim joy, you will be empowering folks to say no to those who are recruiting them to serve on the committees which they dread. I think you will want to assert here that joyful service is always the goal, and you are willing to forego ministry if it is not joyfully done. Better to do a handful of things we love, than to trudge through the things my parents did but which make me miserable. How often don't we end up doing all the stuff which think we are supposed to do, but which we don't really enjoy because we think we are supposed to do them?

2. Rejoice, Pray, and Give Thanks – The Light has come (Epistle, OT, Psalm - That the hearer would be empowered by the Spirit to reassess his/her life and take note of Christ's bold work both to the hearer and through the hearer.)

Again, make sure you read the notes under the Epistle lesson about the difference between the imperatives and the indicatives in the first verse of the reading. God makes the imperatives indicatives in Christ. It is cruelty to tell a sad person to rejoice. But it is foolishness as well to tell a corpse to get up. Jesus has demonstrated that he can speak life to corpses. He also speaks joy to the darkened lives of his people today. His Word accomplishes that which he commands. We are both the object of Christ's salvation and the agents through which he works that salvation in this world. This next week is the darkest week of the year for those of us in the northern hemisphere. The winter solstice often brings to people depression and anxiety, not only is it dark, but Christmas is almost here and we are not ready! Today, however, in dark days and times of stress, Jesus has a sweet word for us. He is the light of the world and he shines for us and through us today. He fills us with God's joy. The value of our lives is not found in the quality of our Christmas but in the love which we experience in this place and which Christ works through us in the world around us. The world does not think much of what He does and what we do. It sees in us a boring life at best. If it digs deeper, it is looking for some pathology or something sick. But the simple truth is that you and I enjoy the total and devout love of God for us. There is no darkness which changes that. He loves us, and what is more, his love is expressed through us to other people. Shining brighter than any light festooned house, feeding a hungry man or putting our arms around a grieving woman or taking a child into our arms and loving that child healthily and warmly, is a

blazing light in this dark old world. No, the press will not come and notice it, the Nobel Prize committees will not be calling you early in the morning to notify you, but God sees it and he delights. This loving merciful God is with each of you throughout this joy-filled and expectant Advent season and blesses you with that gift in your heart of a Christ-child who is the Light of the World.

Perhaps in this sermon we want to urge our folks to check the attitude at the door. The absolute and beautiful love of God worked in Jesus transforms the grumpy life. God is joy and we become more and more like the God we worship. Refreshed and energized by His life changing love, we remember that knows us more intimately than anyone else and despite that he still loves us. That love changes us!

3. Jesus stands among them (Gospel Lesson: That the Spirit of God would infect his people with a holy joy – they have a ridiculously easy job, pointing out a Jesus who stands among a people who don't recognize him.)

John makes a great statement in the Gospel lesson today. He speaks of One who is among the people, but they don't recognize him. John knows his greatness, for John is not worthy even to tie up his sandals, but he is there. John does not bring the messiah nor do we bring Christ to the nations, but we point out the One who is right there.

This sermon speaks of Jesus identification with his fallen creation. He has come to save it. He loves it. He does not wait for it to welcome him or to get something right. He comes. He puts himself right in the middle of His people.

Our job, sweet as it is, is to point to him like John did. *Is this the law – we tend to make evangelism into such a burden – something we have to do. Is John really making it easy for us? Christmas and lots of visitors are just around the corner. We tend to make the Gospel into the Law and have we done this here? Have we made what should be a joyful sharing of something we love into a burden? I find that when I see a film I like, I want to talk about it. Is that a form of “evangelism?”*

Where shall we see him today among the people of this community and planet? This will start with us. He has made himself present to us in word and sacrament. That should help us look out there and see him in the community too. The same Jesus who comes to us is also the same Jesus who is out there, great and mighty, whose sandals we are not worthy to untie either. We kneel at his altar here, we hear his word, and we touch him in baptism, so that when we go out there, we are equipped to recognize him.

We must ask, where is he? He once stood smiling among the penitents who lined up for John's baptism. He was wearing the human nature of that Jewish carpenter, the very human nature he retains to this day. We do not expect him in the miracles, but in the incarnation. Where is he? Jesus is still healing folks. He is feeding the multitudes. He is befriending the lonely. He is in hospitals and clinics, he is found in neighbors who help neighbors and much more. *Another Law development might be that we often think he*

only looks like us and he only shows up in Synodically approved/affiliated places. Dare we point to the non-denominational church that operates a huge foodbank? Dare we point to Baptist lady who smiled and served me at a restaurant today? There is Christ like love in hospitality in this season – so that woman who stresses about having her house just so for her guests. There is Christ like love in the simple things that people do around us all the time. When we point to that, highlight it, we are really pointing to something which resonates with Jesus.

We discussed Patrick the African fellow who attends Phil's congregation. He was terrified to come to church the first day. His mother told him that they likely ate people there. He wasn't sure. In Africa the cans of food always showed what was on the inside of the can on the label. When he went to the grocery store, had he not seen cans with pictures of smiling people on the outside? Perhaps they did eat people. Finally, however, he screwed up the courage to walk in the door, after twice turning away. He learned, the potlucks were not cannibalistic, they may not have always been heart healthy but the Lutherans there did not eat people; they loved people, him and his family. Jesus was there in the handshake of the man who greeted him at the door, he was in the pastor who welcomed him. Jesus was even in loving hands of the woman who made the bowl of green Jell-O he tried at the potluck.

Where is Jesus today? God promises that he is among the folks who do not know him. Sometimes that will be us, sometimes it will really surprise us when we see his smiling face glittering at out from the crowds of folks. But make no mistake, he is out there. Find him. Point to him. John did.

One day he will reappear. On that day, all will see him. But he is here now. He has opened your eyes today to see him so you can point to him wherever you see him.

4. He will surely do it! (Epistle, OT, Psalm – that the Holy Spirit would encourage the hearer to [listen to and](#) trust God to make him/her blameless on the Day of Christ.)

This sermon may want to use the OT lesson and Psalm as the outline. Isaiah promises something to the folks of his day, and the Psalmist records the praise and joy of the people when God kept that promises and returned them to Jerusalem. You might also want to point out just how bleak it was for them with Psalm 137, but I would skip the last verses of that Psalm if I were you. (That is where the psalmist hopes that the Babylonian babies will be dashed against the rocks too.)

We too have been given a great promise. We will rejoice always, pray continually, and be the gentle people whom God describes through Paul. And that promised reality starts to attract us even now. He is keeping his promise as we speak. He will cause righteousness to sprout and grow like seeds in a garden. God will do this, he has promises.

Here one will want to insert the story about the life which has been changed by Christ's presence. As one walks on this life's path with God, He cannot but help change your life.

The things which perhaps you once took for granted now become very important. Things which you might have walked by and not noticed are suddenly very important to you. He changes the way we see the people around us, the way we deal with our possessions, he changes the way we remember our past. Even the most painful things can become different. Paul prayed for relief from a thorn in the flesh, but God blessed him with a “no – my strength is sufficient.” Even my weakness becomes an occasion to find God’s strength.

This God who made a promise to you on the day of your baptism will bring that good work to completion on the day of Christ (Philippians 1:6). He is faithful, He will surely do it!