

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

December 11, 2022 – ADVENT 3, YEAR A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Rejoice! Christ is our JOY!*”*

Isaiah 35:1-10 (The prophet envisions God’s Creation fully restored)
Psalm 146:4-9 (Happy are they who trust in the God who brings justice and mercy)
James 5:7-10 (We are to patiently await the Second Coming of Christ)
St. Matthew 11:2-11 (Jesus the Messiah was known by His gracious miracles)

First, picture a typical church Christmas pageant. Then add one kid who was forced by his parents to be in the program. This teenager continued to protest as they practiced. He shuffled about grumbling, “How can people believe Jesus is the Son of God?” and “Just what makes you believe Christ is the Messiah, and the way to Heaven?” Finally, one little girl spoke up: “We believe Jesus is the Way, because it’s in the song we sang!” “What song?” the young man huffed back. Politely, the child answered, “You know—that one about God made *a way* in a manger!”¹ ... Brilliant!

And yet, that young man’s questions, while bordering on an adolescent temper tantrum, nevertheless echo the serious inquiry which John the Baptizer raises in today’s Gospel lesson. He asks Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Now this bit of skepticism is rather surprising, because earlier, when Jesus had come to John for baptism, the prophet recognized Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Further, John had declared (v. 30): “This is the one about whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks above me, because he existed before me.’” And when John baptized Jesus, he heard the very voice of God proclaim, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

But Matthew is careful to begin this passage, “Now when John heard *in prison* about the deeds of Christ ...” Was the mighty prophet, caged in a Roman fortress, and in despair of ever regaining his freedom, beginning to have doubts?

Was it that Jesus had failed to fulfill the nationalistic hope that the Messiah would deliver Israel from her oppressors and enemies? John himself had prophesied that an axe would cut down the tree at its root, and Jesus would bring a consuming fire. So what is John to make of this Jesus he’s hearing about, who goes from town to town, preaching the Kingdom of God, healing the sick, restoring the disabled, casting out demons, and raising the dead. And to top that—He’s hanging out with lepers, tax collectors, and disreputable women! Perhaps this just didn’t fit with John’s image of the Messiah. It wasn’t what he expected.

This curious text for the third Sunday in Advent challenges us to reflect upon: As we await the coming of Christ, what kind of person, what kind of ministry, and what kind of relationship with us, are we expecting from Jesus? How, as the young man in the Christmas pageant so pointedly asked, do we know that Jesus is the Messiah, and the way to Heaven? Or, as John put it, “Is He the One that was to come, or should we be expecting someone else?”

Well, first, let’s look at Jesus’ answer to John: “Go tell him about the miracles you’ve seen, and God’s truth you have heard.” For in fact, no one else in history has ever been recorded as doing the miracles done by Christ! Yes, there have been holy men and women who were given God’s power to heal the sick, and even raise the dead. But they did not walk on the surface of the sea; change the weather with a command; transform water into wine; feed thousands of people with a only handful of food; restore a man’s ear that was severed by a sword; or come back from the grave.

Second, depending on which Bible scholar you read, there are between 300 and 700 prophecies in Scripture about the Messiah who is to come from God—and all of them were fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth, son of God and son of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As that little girl so wisely said, “God made *a way in a manger*”!

Perhaps that is why the third Sunday of Advent is traditionally designated as “Gaudete” Sunday, or “the Sunday of Rejoicing.” This unexpected joy amid Advent’s sober self-examination and call to repentance is symbolized by the rose candle we lit today. Pink is a cheery color. It even finds its way into expressions of wellbeing, such as feeling “in the pink.”

Historically, the first words of the introit for this Sunday’s Mass were taken from Philippians 4:4-6: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ...The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”²

The spirit of the Liturgy all through Advent is one of expectation and preparation for the feast of Christmas, as well as for the second coming of Christ. But the penitential disciplines suitable to that spirit are suspended on Gaudete Sunday, in order to symbolize the joy and gladness we share at our promised Redemption through Christ. This is our opportunity to affirm: Yes, indeed, Jesus Christ was, and is, and ever shall be, the One to Come! He is without a doubt the Messiah sent from God, the Savior of the World, the Lamb of God who takes away our sins and makes a way for us to go to Heaven and be with God forever. Rejoice, I say, *rejoice!*

Even through his doubts, John the Baptizer points us to the One who is to come. And, like John, we too, must respond to Jesus on the basis of what we see and hear Him do. So, in the week to come, keep your eyes and ears open for what Jesus may be doing and saying in your own life, or the life of someone you know.

What’s that? You don’t think you’ll hear anything, because God doesn’t talk to you? We are His children, and every parent talks to his or her kids! God—as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—speaks to each of His children in the way we can best perceive or understand Him.

Verbal people (like myself) tend to hear words inside our heads. Others may actually hear words spoken aloud. Intuitive persons (more like my husband) get a “gut feeling,” or a strong leaning in a certain direction. Visual folks, such as artists, may actually see images or visions. But for most Christians, Our Lord makes Himself known to us through the Holy Scriptures and when we talk to Him in prayer.

And, I can’t say it enough: If you’re not reading your Bible and praying every day—or *almost* every day—you’re far less likely to “hear” God speaking to you. Jesus communicates with some of us through the Holy Eucharist. Others may connect with God in nature, or in dreams. Sometimes we even experience His love in the affection shown to us by a cat or dog, or in the innocent joy that little children display.

Please don’t ever think that God does not speak to you. Just try listening in different ways. You will know it is God when the message you receive gives you peace, comfort, and joy—and if it aligns with biblical teaching. So, on this Gaudete Sunday, go forth rejoicing that you can be certain who your Savior is, and... that He walks with you, and He talks with you, and He tells you “you are His own.” *Amen!*

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “Rejoice, be Glad—and Be Sure!” 15 December 2013, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. Scott Bradford, “During a Christmas Pageant ...” 27 December 2002, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/11380/christmas-advent-by-scott-bradford) <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/11380/christmas-advent-by-scott-bradford> 6 December 2022. Used with permission.

² “Gaudete Sunday,” [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaudete_Sunday), 14 November 2022 < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaudete_Sunday > 6 December 2022.