

Waiting...for Joy!

I forgot to mention in yesterday's email that today's Advent colour is pink. Ta Da!

This is the third Sunday in Advent, also known as Gaudete or Joy Sunday! Gaudete is Latin for rejoice.

Today's reading is from Isaiah 61. Last week's reading was from Deutero-Isaiah, while today's is from Trito-Isaiah or the Third Part of Isaiah, written approximately 538 BCE. It is a series of oracles written with themes of hope, restoration and the goodness of God.

If you remember, last week's reading began with an assurance that Jerusalem would be returned to favour with God. This week's reading speaks of a return to restoration in the good news of deliverance. God has reclaimed God's people and has assured them that there will no longer be chaos and ruin. This is indeed very good news!

God promises to those who are mourning that they will receive "a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit". (Isaiah 61.3, NRSV) What a wonderful image! The community, as a whole, had been in mourning, and they have now been promised to receive fragrant flowers instead of ashes, they will be anointed with oil for return to health rather than anointed as the dying, and will receive a mantle of praise or cape around our shoulders, instead of a pale compliment.

One of my favourite things is to wrap myself in a cozy blanket when I'm feeling cold. It's such a comforting feeling, and the mantle of praise is meant to evoke the same feeling. Safety, comfort and joy.

The Advent wreath originated as a German Lutheran tradition in the 16th Century, but didn't resemble the Advent wreath we use now until the 19th century. The tradition of the Advent wreath was not widely accepted in North America until the 1930's.

The round shape symbolises the infinite love of God. The evergreen boughs that make up the wreath symbolise the hope of eternal life brought by Jesus Christ. The candles on the Advent wreath are most interesting. On most "modern" Advent wreaths four or five candles are used. Four candles are placed at the "corners" of the wreath, whereas the fifth candle is placed in the centre.

The centre candle, usually white, represents the Christ. The other four candles can be purple, blue, pink or red. Advent is a penitential season which is why purple was the originally used colour for three of the four candles. More recently, blue has been adopted as the colour for Advent to differentiate it from the penitential season of Lent. Regardless of whether you prefer purple or blue candles, on the third Sunday of Advent the pink or rose candle is lit to represent Gaudete or Rejoice!

Generally, the first week of Advent (which is Latin for Coming) is Hope, followed by Peace, followed by Joy, followed by Love. The Joy candle is pink, while the others can be purple or blue.

In the UK, the four red advent candles are often linked to the Sunday Revised Common Lectionary readings for Advent, each candle representing those looking forward to the coming of Christ: the hope of all God's people (week one), the Old Testament (week two), John the Baptist (week three) and Mary the mother of Jesus (week four).

It has been my experience in the Church that Advent is a time of waiting and anticipation with an underlying feeling of hope. We are waiting on the arrival of the Messiah – the birth of the Christ. It is a season of anticipation, moreso than penitence. In the early days of observing Advent, it was introduced as a penitential season with fasting in preparation for the coming of Jesus; similar to the season of Lent, yet shorter in duration.

The hanging of the greens is a ceremony that has been around since Victorian England. It is a time, either just before or at the beginning of Advent in which greenery would be collected and used to decorate homes and Churches, as well as other public buildings such as schools.

Some Churches have incorporated a hanging of the greens or “decoration Sunday” into their Advent I service.

What does this have to do with the Third Sunday of Advent, or Joy Sunday?

Traditions such as decorating, hanging the greens, setting up the advent wreath and such can call us back to an earlier time. Perhaps memories as a child in the church or at home, hanging greenery collected from the backyard or nearby forest. In Dorchester, we used to decorate the Church in stages for Christmas, during the four weeks of Advent.

Advent I would see the “children's tree” or “Jesse Tree” assembled, but left bare and during the Advent Lessons and Carols Service, the Jesse Tree Symbols would be hung by the children. Advent IV would see the rest of the trees decorated, and the large “wagon wheel” candle holders suspended from the lights in anticipation of Christmas Eve Services.

When we participate in traditions such as these, it is hoped that they illicit a kind of joy, rather than melancholy.

With my Beloved David's death, I wasn't planning to decorate for Christmas. Then I remembered I would be participating in many Zoom calls and two Christmas services from home, so I decided to decorate the top of a bookcase which can be seen behind me, when I Zoom from home. And then it led to hanging the garlands, which led to the rest of the decorations going up. And while I am still sad, in that moment I felt joy in remembering how much he loved Christmas.

The readings of Advent speak to Jesus first advent, his current advent and his final advent. The third week takes a break from the waiting and focuses on rejoicing. This is why the clergy can wear pink (only twice a year – once at Gaudete Sunday and again at Laetare Sunday). This is why the candle is pink...to provide a break in the often solemn time of waiting to, instead, rejoice in the moment.

The Isaiah reading reminds us that we are God's chosen, and as such we will receive God's favour. Not only will our faithfulness be rewarded, but because of our endurance in times of trial, we will be adorned as a bride for her bridegroom. Now, I don't mean adorned in a puffy white dress, as we understand a bride dressing now...no, this is more a tradition of an Indian or Hindu wedding, where the groom will be adorned in floral garlands and the bride will be gifted with jewels to represent wealth and status.

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being 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 with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels". (Isaiah 61.10)

These images represent, not earthly wealth and status; rather, they represent joy and relief in being restored to right relationship with God. Where there had been a time of difficulty with our relationship the Divine, the community and ourselves have been restored. We are once again on the right path. Which isn't to say we won't ever stumble off the path again, it simply means that when we mess things up; when we turn our back to God, we can and will be restored to right relationship. All we need do is ask.

Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son. He had been a bit of a brat, demanding what he didn't yet deserve, and his father, being a gentle man, gave him his inheritance. He squandered the inheritance and bitterly cursed the choices he had made. The longing to return home was great, so he practices his speech as he's feeding another farmer's pigs...a speech where he's asking to return as a labourer as he does not deserve to return to his father's favour...he practices this speech all the way home.

And when his father sees his son, he doesn't get a chance to say his speech. His father, who had feared his son had died, sees him alive and much worse for wear. He doesn't ask anything of his son. No, "where have you been" or "what have you done". None of that.

He simply embraces and kisses his son, then calls for a feast. The one who had been considered dead is alive and we must rejoice! He calls for a robe to cover his son's rags and sandals to wear on his feet, and puts the family signet ring on his son's finger. It's time to celebrate! Let us rejoice!

Rejoice. Joy! Gaudete.

Which brings us back to the Isaiah reading for today. The relationship has been restored. For this generation and for generations to come.

Isaiah writes, "Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed". (Isaiah 61.9, NRSV)

Remember my brothers and sisters, we are these descendants. We are those whom the Lord has blessed. May we then go forward to bless all we encounter in our lives.

Perhaps this is the Christmas when you forgive someone who has wronged you?
Perhaps this is the time to set down a generational grudge?

Write someone a letter to reconnect. Maybe you feel they wronged you?

Perhaps they won't even remember what they did to you. Maybe you don't remember, but you're not in right relationship. Instead of taking up all that space and using all that energy on something that you cannot fully remember now, you make the decision to forgive them, especially if this is someone with whom you were once close.

Please understand, I'm not talking about someone who was abusive or harmed you in your relationship. I'm talking about a grievance or falling out, NOT giving an abuser a chance to abuse you again.

This Christmas will be unlike any other. Instead of focusing on what we cannot do, let us try to embrace what we can do. Pare down and try simple instead of stressful. Choose peace instead of ragged frustration.

Regardless, I wish you today, and always, a time of unmitigated joy. The beauty of the snow gently falling as you are tucked under a cozy blanket, purring cat on your lap, cup of hot tea at our side. The joy of the unexpected. The joy of the simple. The joy of the season.

For this, and all these simple joys, let us give thanks.

Amen.

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Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11