

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

"Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to [Jesus], 'Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" (Matthew 11:2-3).

On this Third Sunday in Advent, we are moving increasingly closer to Christmas Day. We have passed the halfway point on the Advent wreath. Today, three candles are lit, including that oddly colored pink candle. Pink doesn't exactly match the other candles. So, what is with this color pink this day?

Well, traditionally, the Third Sunday in Advent has been called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for "rejoice." And that pink candle reminds us that the Third Sunday in Advent is about joy.

Now, we certainly hear about joy today. We spoke together about joy beginning in the Introit's antiphon from Philippians 4:4 saying: ***"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice."*** Then in the Introit itself from Psalm 71, we spoke of the great joy we have in the righteous acts of the triune God. You know, those things God accomplished to save us.

In our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 35, we heard joy proclaimed in that reading: ***"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing"*** (Isaiah 35:1-2).

But following that reading, there was a shift. Our Epistle from James 5 speaks of patience in suffering. And then it gets worse. Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew 11 begins by saying, ***"Now when John heard in prison ..."*** (Matthew 11:2a). And what does a person do in prison? He waits.

Who enjoys waiting? Now, there are different kinds of waiting. There's the kind of waiting that is limited by agonizing that you have to wait at the post office or at the license office. It may be less than an hour, but often, that short waiting feels like an eternity. The end will certainly come, but it feels so far away.

Or what is it like when you are expecting something, but you can't control when it arrives? What if you are waiting for the cable guy? Or a package? An important phone call, or email?

Or what about if you are figuratively "hitting the wall"? Let's say you are working on a project, and you need an idea, and you are coming up with nothing. You are waiting for an insight, or an epiphany. That can be nerve racking, especially, if you are working with a deadline. There are so many kinds of waiting. Some are easier and some are more difficult than others.

Now, waiting is not inherently bad, but waiting can come with some real difficulties – and sometimes waiting can lead to big problems, like wondering what exactly it is that you are waiting for.

And waiting can lead to second guessing.

“Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to [Jesus], “Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?”” (Matthew 11:2-3).

After baptizing Jesus in the Jordan, seeing the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and hearing the voice of God the Father saying, ***“This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased”*** (Matthew 3:7), John the Baptist now waits in Herod's prison after he preached against Herod's affair with his brother's wife.

Now, while we are not physically imprisoned, yours and my circumstances could lead us to second-guess Jesus' place in our lives. Daily, we face many personal challenges regarding our health, our wealth, and our relationships. And daily, we contend with a culture that is increasingly at odds with the Christian confession. Daily, it often doesn't feel like God's kingdom has come. Our daily challenges can lead us to wonder if Jesus is the real deal, if Jesus is truly the Savior from sin, death and the devil.

Could all the waiting in a prison cell have caused John to doubt?

A short answer to that question is “no.” John the Baptist could not doubt what he has witnessed regarding Jesus of Nazareth. He literally saw the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus. He literally heard the voice of God the Father. John had no doubts. John knew. He trusts in Jesus.

But why is John asking this question? Well, John isn't asking the question for his own sake, but for the sake of his disciples. You see, John's disciples believed that the Messiah would be none other than their master John. Now, they certainly heard about Jesus, and they thought of Jesus as a possible prophet, but they did not have faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Certainly, John's disciples had heard their master speak highly of Jesus, but they had not heard the preaching or seen the miraculous signs of Jesus. So, John's disciples persisted with the idea that John was the promised Messiah.

But why couldn't John have left it at that? Why couldn't John have left his disciples to their own opinion?

Well, what was the calling of John the Baptist? God called John to be the forerunner to the Messiah. John was called to prepare the way for the Lord by leading people to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. John was called to confront sinners with the mirror of God's Law, so that they may see and discern the state of their lives toward God and their neighbor. John was called to direct all people from themselves to Jesus, the true Messiah and Savior of the world.

And for John's preaching, he received disdain, persecution, imprisonment, cross and death. This is the reward that all true prophets and faithful preachers receive. The fallen world gives no other payment. This is why John was Herod's prisoner.

So, while in prison, John the Baptist calls his disciples to seek Jesus out and calls them to ask this question to Jesus: "***Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?***" (Matthew 11:3).

And as good disciples of John, they fulfill their calling. They go to Jesus and ask Him that question. But clearly, when they came to Jesus, they were offended by what they saw and heard. They knew their master John sent them to Jesus because John proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, the very Lamb of God, the One who has come to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

But they were not convinced. Yes, they thought John could have been the Messiah even with his quiriness in wearing camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey. But if John isn't the man, they naturally expected a kingly figure – a man wrapped in gold and purple cloth, a man found in a royal palace.

Instead, they found a Man surrounded by sick and miserable people, a Man in the midst of the blind, the lame, the deaf, the mute. A Man among lepers. They see a Man in such a lowly form that He could be mistaken for a hospital attendant or a physician of the sick rather than regarded as the King of Israel. As John's disciples witness this, they are reminded that their master John spoke so very highly of Jesus. Jesus speaks to John's disciples: ***"Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me"*** (Matthew 11:6).

The world is filled with people who are offended by Jesus. The world sees a lowly Person in a lowly place. The world takes offense and stumbles at this rock of stumbling. Yet, if Jesus only displayed an ounce of His divine power, the world would rush to Him.

On this Third Sunday in Advent, where is the joy in our Gospel lesson? Trust me, it's there. John the Baptist sees the joy even though he is awaiting his very death in a prison cell. And eventually, John's disciples will see the joy in Jesus.

We are often tempted to trust only in things we see – things that fit our expectations of what God should do. That's only natural. It is sinful. But again, that is natural. It is natural to expect that when we are faithful to God that He'll bless us in ways that are immediate and tangible and visible. And the most visible, tangible evidence that time was that John was in prison and likely to face death. It is certainly easy to be offended with Jesus when God chooses to work *that* way. It is easy to give up on *any* idea of joy in the Lord when our circumstances seem to count up on the deficit side.

St. Paul was inspired to write today's Introit antiphon – ***"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice"*** (Philippians 4:4) – from guess where? Prison! He rejoiced knowing that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah. Jesus proved to be the Messiah by healing, cleansing, forgiving, raising and teaching.

Jesus is the answer to our struggles and doubts. He gave us our identity and destiny in Holy Baptism. He speaks His forgiveness to us in the Absolution. He comes to heal us in the Sacrament of the Altar. He proclaims the Gospel of restoration into our ears.

Joy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ alone! Through His perfect work done at the cross and through the empty tomb and now delivered to us in the Means of Grace, His kingdom has come! On this Gaudete Sunday, we have so much joy: Christ took upon Himself our sin, He died for us sinners, and He gave us forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation in return. ***"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice"***! Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +