



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

On Rejoicing and Repentance_ - The Third Sunday of Advent- 12_12_2021

I speak to you as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Today is Gaudete Sunday. As I was telling you when I began the service, *gaudete*, Latin for rejoice, it's a bit of church Latin. It comes from the reading today from Philippians, from the beginning of the time in which Christians observed the time and seasons and declared such a thing as Advent and Lent.

Christians have said these words from Philippians, read at the beginning of the service, "*Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.*" "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." "*Dominus enim prope est.*" "For the Lord is near at hand." And so you and I have been bidden to rejoice and all of our readings and our prayers are telling us and reminding us to rejoice.

Our collect says stir up your power of God, because we are so sorely hindered by our sins, and let your mighty grace pour upon us. And our reading from Zephaniah tells the people to shout out. And our readings from our canticle is the same. But there is a kind of interruption. In our reading from Luke, we meet John the Baptist. He doesn't so much say rejoice. Instead he says, "You brood of vipers." What a buzz kill. You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Now we might chalk this up to something new that the church did recently by placing this incredible passage in Luke about repentance next to rejoicing. But this has actually been the practice of the church from the beginning. From the beginning, rejoicing and repentance in advent go together. There is an early hymn from the late 16th century known as Gaudete. It's sung mostly in Latin, and so I took some time to translate it and I want to share with you three verses.

It begins by saying,

Rejoice today for Christ is born of Mary

– and this is what we read.

The time of grace has come
What we have wished for;
Songs of joy
Let us give back faithfully.
God has become man,
And nature marvels,

The world has been renewed
By Christ who is King.
The closed gate of Ezekiel
Has been passed through,
Whence the light is seen;
Salvation has been found.

The closed gate of Ezekiel has been passed through. This was a reference to the geography of Jerusalem, to the east gate in the old city, through which the promise came in Ezekiel that the Messiah would walk through that gate and liberate the people. And that gate had two porticos. A portico of mercy and a portico of repentance. And when Jesus walked through that gate, He declared the time of mercy and repentance. The people of God in Jesus' time had felt that they had fallen so far away from God's will that the gates of repentance themselves had been shut. And in the many different interplays of fights between Christians and Jews and Muslims, one king actually sealed that passageway because he wanted to keep the Messiah from coming.

But in fact, the good news that John is delivering to the people of God in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, is that in fact, those gates were open. In fact, that relationship was still alive. In fact, God would still be with them. In fact, that relationship was able to be repaired. And in fact, Christ was going to walk through those gates and to bring the people together and to reconcile us to God.

So everything we read about in our gospel today from Luke, all of that exhortation that John is giving all of the things that are being said to ordinary people like you and me, to tax collectors and soldiers, people with dirty hands, all of that is good news, and we must not miss that. And in fact, there is in the text itself, signposts that indicate the journey of repentance and joy that the people of God are on.

The first one comes at the last line of the gospel in verse 18, where we read that John preached the gospel to the people. What is meant by that, it's meant that the possibility of repentance was being opened to us through Jesus. The next signpost you see in that gospel is that very word repentance. It's a careful word chosen because there are many ways in which we think about repentance. We read in other pieces of the scripture that if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off, which seems extreme.

And of course we heard in the prelude today, the words delivered to the Pharaoh to "let my people go." That was an invitation to repentance. And those words go to all the pharaohs of this world. But repentance, as it's used in the gospel today, is *metanoia*. And that means to have a kind of change of mind and soul. So when John preaches repentance, he's inviting people to change their mind, to go through an expansion, to see things different, to see themselves and God, this world differently. And that is good news too. And that is a reason to rejoice.

And the final signpost to the geography of this text, as it were, is that the promise of John is the promise of the presence of Christ. For when he says that one would come baptizing with the Holy Spirit, that is simply Christ giving the gift of Himself. So in this text,

rejoicing and repentance go together. And in this time in which we celebrate the coming of Christ, you and I are called to make a kind of deliberate work of rejoicing and repentance.

In the painting I have on the bulletin cover, I have an unusual painting by Leonardo da Vinci. He did it in 1516, right before he died. And this is a very unusual depiction of John the Baptist. Usually when John the Baptist is depicted in art, he looks like he's been doing crossfit in the wilderness, he looks incredibly cut and he looks incredibly masculine. It looks like he's ready to fight. And of course, that goes with the whole saying like you brood of vipers. But this John the Baptist looks like some kind of celebrity, much softer, feminine.

People have wondered what Leonardo had in mind when he did this. Was he thinking about someone he knew who was particularly beautiful? Was he thinking about the kind of work he was doing, which is a gesture that they used to do in the Renaissance called sfumato, which is Italian for smoke, where you kind of smoothed out the lines in your subject, a little bit like Instagram, right? And then some have thought that maybe it was the Mona Lisa, who he liked her so much he kind of made her a little bit like a man. And that was John. He was old. He had that kind of permission. He could do whatever he wanted. He died about three months later.

Now, certainly Leonardo da Vinci was a complex guy. Newsflash – so are all of you. But there's a point here. It's in the smile and the pointing to God, because for Leonardo, beauty was the ladder between humanity and God. And the good news of Jesus Christ is that that beauty that we encounter in this world is but the image of God that's been fulfilled in Christ. And we must repent to find our way to see the beauty that exists behind the beauty of the picture.

Today. I want to invite you to engage in a little bit of self reflection about that interaction between repentance and rejoicing. What does it look like for you? We may not all be Renaissance artists, but each of us has a kind of work of grace in our lives. And the three things I want to lift for you is a kind of echo of the three things that we've been seeing in the scripture today. The first concerns the gospel. Christmas is a time in which you celebrate memories. They matter. Those traditions matter. They're beautiful. The fact that we have had our Christmases interrupted is a kind of trauma. That's incredibly important. This beautiful stage is a kind of exercise in memory for something we've done since 1929. But don't confuse the memory of Christmas, however precious that might be, with the miracle of Christmas of Christ being born in you. Do not miss the miracle in the memory.

The second concerns repentance. In our reading from Philippians, the line that comes right after I laid all that Latin on you, was this: be anxious in nothing. Repentance for you might take many forms. You might have to write a letter. You might have to say you're sorry. You might have to do something different. You might try to cut back on the sweets or the fat or the sugar or whatever you're doing. But in the scripture today, repentance concerns anxiety, and we are living through an anxious age and we are all tempted to despair. And for us, repentance means having our minds changed about the whole sweep of what we've been going through as a country.

God is not finished with us. This world is not going to hell in a handbasket. It might have exceeded your own grasp of comprehension or control, but the fact that you are no longer in power might actually be God's work in you. And that might be good news. In fact, I'm certain of it. So let your minds be changed. Let yourself be transformed by that *metanoia*, by that opening.

And finally, hold on to the presence of Christ. Hold on to that baptism and the Holy Spirit. Let the fruits of the spirit pour out of you. Let Christ live within you. Let your spirit move through this time of increasing shortness of days to light lights and find your way and lift up others and walk into the God given right you have to joy. So rejoice and repent.

I want to close today by finishing that Latin translation from Gaudete.

Therefore, let this gathering
Now sing in brightness
Let us praise the Lord
And greet our King.

Let us greet the King. Let us rejoice.

Amen.