

Third Sunday of Advent

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O' Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Good morning!

Today we lit our third Advent Candle, the rose or pink one, this color represents a shift in emphasis. This is sometimes referred to as Gaudate Sunday. Gaudate is a Latin word meaning rejoice. It is the first word of the ancient opening antiphon for today's liturgy and is taken from the first verse of our second reading, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

The first reading and the Canticle from Isaiah also ask to sing and shout for joy and to rejoice!

The pink Advent Candle symbolizes this change in focus from a season of preparation, examination and penitence to one of anticipation and joyous expectation. And for good reason, we are over half way there, in 11 days we will gather on Christmas Day to celebrate the feast of the Nativity of the Lord.

But then there's today's Gospel.

Last week I tried to paint a little different picture of John the Baptist. Well, actually, I tried to get us to think a little differently about John and his message based on a painting showing him as a young man, clean shaven and not the wild and wooly character we usually think of and see depicted in art.

It was easier to make that case, last week, in that Gospel passage we learned when John was preaching; "It was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius," and a little about his message, "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," and we were told in words of Isaiah that he was, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!'" However, we hadn't actual heard any words from his mouth.

The first words we do hear are: "You brood of vipers;" hardly a cry to sing and rejoice! And even though we think of a brood as young and cute, recently hatched, little babies, it's hard to put a very positive spin on, "you brood of vipers" or to see how this can be construed as a new joyous and delightful emphasis or is going to be 'Good News.'

This sounds more like the fire and brimstone we have grown to associate with the rather burly and hairy John; a message to get the brood brooding, the viper a little vexatious, and one that might even inspire someone to get up, blow out the pink candle, and replace it with the more penitential purple one.

And the Baptist is just getting warmed up.

John asks the crowd who came to him to be baptized, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He tells them to bear fruits worthy of repentance and not to rely on the religious heritage. He talks of the ax at the foot of the tree and says that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and burned, and concludes by saying of the coming messiah, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Luke sums all of this up with, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people."

With all the talk of vipers, the ax, and the winnowing fork, its hard to see how this can be good news. Yet, crowds are flocking to him.

As John continues speaking, we begin to realize the "crowds" is a euphemism, Luke's polite way of describing the outcasts, those who many times feel shunned and rejected by society. They are represented by the tax collectors who make their living by exploiting their neighbors and lining their own pockets and by the soldiers who are really mercenaries and thugs who make money by means of threats and extortion.

These are the people, the ones rejected and despised by the religious leaders and authorities, who are racing to John to be baptized and cleansed and reformed. Unlike the self-satisfied, self-righteous ones who are convinced of their own goodness and superiority, too caught up in their positions and power to even recognize their need for repentance and transformation, the misfits and sinners are not offended by John's words but are attracted to him and ask only "what should we do?"

And John tells them: To the crowd he says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To the tax collectors, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And to the Soldiers, "Do not extort money ... and be satisfied with your wages." It's the same thing we try to teach our children: share, be fair, don't bully, and be content.

This is Good News. This is great news actually, for those who gathered around John seeking baptism and for us gathered here on Gaudate Sunday, preparing our hearts for Christmas. This is news we can all rejoice in.

Just as strongly and forcefully as John preached repentance and conversion, he now clears the path and levels and smooths the way.

John demands nothing heroic or difficult or very demanding. He doesn't ask us to follow him into the wilderness, to spend long hours in prayer and fasting.

To change our lives he asks that we just simply start by doing something simple: share, be fair, and care.

No great steps, nothing too demanding or impossible; we don't have to be perfect in order to be faithful and to grow in our spiritual life.

John tells us to just behave and to be decent and to trust and to believe that if we can do those little things, just those simple acts of kindness.....Then, when our days of Advent preparation are complete, and the Messiah comes, and Christ is born anew in our lives again this year, we just might find ourselves in the light of His grace, waking up on Christmas, loving God and our neighbor, and ourselves in ways we never imagined possible.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!!

In the name of the Father.... Amen.