

Advent 3C, 2012

Text: Luke 7:18-28

Title: Rejoice?

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Today is a truly odd Sunday in the church year. The rose candle is lit, the candle of joy. The Introit, the Old Testament, the Gradual, and the Epistle all call out "Rejoice."

Christmas is just around the corner, about a week away, most of us have been celebrating all month with parties and cookies and cards and decorations.

But in the midst of the celebration, someone is missing from the party. Someone you expect to be there. Someone who you're sure would be right there in the middle of it. He's missing out.

That person is John the Baptist.

John was the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus. Last week we heard him bold preach God's Word. He didn't care what anyone else thought. He didn't care if he offended anyone. He just let them have it. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

He also boldly pointed to Jesus Christ, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He baptized Jesus and saw the Holy Spirit descend from heaven. He heard the voice from heaven say, "You are my beloved Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased."

You would expect John to be right there with Jesus all the way. You would expect him to be there celebrating with Jesus and rejoicing with him.

But he's not. It's a shock. John isn't with Jesus. Instead He's in prison.

John got himself imprisoned for his bold words. King Herod and his half-sister Herodias were living together, and John dared to speak out against it. To shut him up, Herod had John thrown in prison.

This is not what John was expecting. He was expecting Herod to be destroyed by the wrath of God. John was expecting Jesus to execute the judgment of God on all the sinners. He was expecting Herod to be cut down like a dead tree and tossed into the fire.

And yet it was John who was cut down. John who was tossed in prison. And just Herod kept doing whatever he wanted to do.

Things had not turned out well for John.

You've had this experience, too. Things have not always gone well. Things have not gone the way you have expected. You've prayed, you've looked to God for help, and nothing seems to happen. No one seems to be listening.

You've prayed at the bedside of you loved ones as they died.

You've prayed after searching for a job for months without any luck.

You've prayed after yet another fight with your spouse and your marriage is on the rocks.

You've prayed to God, and nothing happened. Your loved one still died. No job was offered. The marriage ended in divorce.

And when that happened, you started to doubt. Maybe I've got this wrong. Maybe God isn't listening or doesn't care. Maybe He doesn't even exist at all.

John the Baptist had his doubts. Some people think that John didn't really doubt Jesus, he was just sending his disciples to Jesus for their sake, so they wouldn't doubt, and so they would trust in Jesus.

But if we take this text seriously, it's clear that John at least had some questions about Jesus.

And this is good for us to know, too. Even though John was a tremendous preacher, John is still a real human being. He has his moments of weakness and doubt. He still has questions. He's not quite sure that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus had not come in power and wrath. He did not strike down all the unrepentant sinners, like Herod and Herodias.

John began to wonder if Jesus really was the Messiah, if He was the coming one whose way he was supposed to prepare.

And so he sent two disciples to Jesus to ask Him just this question. "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus response has two parts:

First, they are to report to John what they themselves have personally seen and heard.

Second, Jesus describes what he's been doing using key words and phrases from the Old Testament.

So first, the disciples are to be personal witnesses to what they have seen and heard Jesus do. Jesus doesn't give them a theological explanation or a rational argument, but he tells them talk about actions. What have they seen Jesus do? And then they are to report Jesus' words. What has Jesus taught?

We can get into long and complex arguments and debates over the nature of God and good and evil, about whether spiritual things that you can't see truly exist.

But the most basic answer to any question, when you have doubts over God's existence, is to look to Jesus Christ and what He has done.

Jesus is a real, physical, human being. The Word made Flesh (come back on Christmas Day for John 1). He lived and died. You can prove it. Other non-Christian historians wrote about Jesus.

We may not see and hear Jesus in the same way that the disciples did, but we have their witness to what Jesus has said and done. We know that Jesus died on the cross and rose again. We have the witness of the apostles in sacred Scripture. This witness has been handed down to us from generation to generation going all the way back to the disciples.

When you start to wonder about God and if He's real, when you have doubts about your faith, look to Jesus and what He has done. Read about His birth, death and resurrection.

And when you do, look back to the Old Testament. See how Jesus fulfills all the words written about Him.

Jesus points John back to Isaiah, and the promise that the Messiah would be a healer and would bring good news to the poor. He would not just strike down the wicked, but He would care for the poor and needy.

If you want to understand Jesus Christ, look to the Old Testament. Start in the beginning. See how all of human history leads up to His coming. Starting in January our Friday morning Bible Class will go all the way back to Genesis to find Jesus there at work in creation from the beginning.

So when John has his doubts, Jesus doesn't get mad at him. "How dare you question me!" He doesn't get upset or disappointed by John. He gently and calmly says, "Look and listen to what I'm doing and read your Bible, and it will all come together."

That is what you are to do in your moments of questions and doubts. Jesus won't get mad at you for having questions, for not understanding. Look at His calm and caring response to John.

If you are wondering about God, don't try to figure out the unseen God, look and listen to God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. Don't ask "Where is God, what's He doing?" ask "Where is Jesus, what's He doing?"

He's right here, like He's always been, to forgive you, to bless you, and to strengthen you with His Spirit. You may not see him healing, but you see Him giving life through Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. You may not sit and listen at His feet, but He still speaks His good news to you each week.

Whenever people see and hear about tragedy and violence, when they see the results of sin in our world, like the shootings in Connecticut, the storms on the East Coast, the violence and war in the Middle East, they wonder if God is real, why doesn't He do something about all the pain and the suffering in this world.

He did. He sent Jesus Christ to bear in His body all the sin of the world, yours, mine, those children and teachers who died, so that we might have hope in the face of death. Death did not conquer Jesus Christ, and death will not be the end for those who die in Him.

Those parents whose children were murdered on Friday could care less about cards and trees and presents and parties, they just want their kids back. Jesus was born so that could happen. Jesus came to give life that lasts beyond the grave.

This is what gives you joy today. True joy. Not artificial happiness. Not joy at getting what you want for Christmas. Not the joy of good food and good company. The kind of joy only Jesus can bring. Rejoice in the Lord always, even in prison, even in mourning, even in doubt, even today, three Sundays into Advent.