

Matthew 11:2–10
Advent III (Gaudete)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 17, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

In Germany, the candles of an Advent wreath are often one color, for example, red. In the United States, or on the Advent wreaths the Sunday School students made a few weeks ago, there are usually three purple candles and one pink candle. Technically speaking, the purple candles are violet and the pink candle is rose. Today is the day for the rose candle. The name of this Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, is Gaudete, the Latin word for “rejoice.” That comes from the first word of the Introit for today, which is taken straight from Philippians 4:4–5: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.”

Violet is the color for the penitential season of Lent, so using violet during Advent reminds us that Advent, too, is a time of repentance. That’s what “penitential” means. The focus is on repentance. This season of repentance, like the season of Lent, is a time of turning away from sin as we approach a major festival of the church year. In this case, Christmas. The rose candle, then, is like a toned down purple. It’s a joyful color, a reminder that even in the midst of this season of repentance, Christians have joy knowing that God’s mercy triumphs over our sin.

Today, Gaudete Sunday, is a day to rejoice in what God has done for us in spite of what we’ve done. It’s a time to comfort God’s people, a time to speak tenderly to Jerusalem, to speak tenderly to the Church, telling her that in Jesus Christ her warfare is ended; in Jesus Christ her iniquity is pardoned. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!

And yet, John the Baptist is sitting in prison, soon to be executed. That's hardly a place for rejoicing. He could have still been out in the wilderness fulfilling his life's calling: proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins in preparation for the coming of Jesus. Instead, John the Baptist was stripped of everything. He was relegated to a dark prison cell and kept away from everything going on. For John, this could very well have been a time of doubt. For his disciples, it most certainly was a time of doubt. That's why John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus, asking: "Are you the one to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus came to make all things new, to tell Jerusalem that her warfare is ended and her iniquity pardoned. Yet John is sitting in a cell as a prisoner of war. He was on the front lines, preaching against those in high places, and then became a casualty of Herod's desires. For the disciples of John the Baptist, nothing seemed to be going according to plan. So John sends His disciples to Jesus for clarification.

Jesus answered John's disciples, perhaps for their sake more than for John's sake: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." Jesus is telling these disciples with His deeds exactly who He is: the coming one, the one John the Baptist was pointing to. Jesus is saying without words: "Even though it doesn't look like it, even though it doesn't seem like it, or feel like it, the reality is that I am the one to come, the Messiah of Israel. Everything John the Baptist expected is here, and more." John the Baptist might be a prisoner of war, but a few prisoners of war doesn't mean the war is lost. It means the war is still ongoing. John and his disciples and all those who are prevented from seeing the reality of what Jesus is doing need to hear the message of hope and joy from the leader's mouth.

That's the way it goes today as well. When you consider your life, or the state of this congregation or the state of our church body, or the Christian church throughout the world, it might seem as though we're fighting a losing battle. When you're one small part of a much larger whole, it's tempting to take the circumstances you're in right now and assume that's the case at all times and places. It's true, the same kinds of suffering from the devil are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world (1 Pet 5:9). But after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to *eternal* glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you (1 Pet 5:10).

Whatever prison you find yourself in now—whatever anxiety, despair, physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual suffering you're undergoing—this momentary affliction is preparing you for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. We look not to what is seen but to the things that are unseen. The troubles you see now are transient, but the reality you don't see right now is eternal (2 Cor 4:17–18). No matter what kind of prison or what kind of captivity you face right now, whatever is right before your very eyes, Jesus continues working in unseen ways, through His Word and through the sacraments, for restoration and peace.

Blessed is the one who is not offended by Jesus and how He works in these unseen ways. Jesus says: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). But it's easy for us to grow impatient. Our sinful flesh wants to see results. Instead, we often see what looks like a losing battle. We see the prison walls around us and wonder what Jesus is up to. We see our leaders carried off or lost in battle and question whether or not Jesus really is the coming one who makes wars cease to the end of the earth. The seeming contradiction between what we see and what we believe according to God's Word becomes too great and we stumble over Jesus. We take offense at the unexpected

way he's working, through weakness, suffering, and the cross. It looks like the Devil wins, but that's only part of God's greater plan and purpose.

When the messengers of John the Baptist went back to John, taking Jesus's message with them, Jesus then began to speak to the crowds about John the Baptist. Jesus is basically saying: "What did you think was going to happen? You thought a prophet of God would experience something less than suffering and an imminent death?" "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" A preacher who says exactly what everyone wants to hear? A pastor to scratch your itching ears and confirm you in your false belief and practice? There are many such teachers. Their God is their belly. But that's not who John the Baptist is. That's not who any true prophet of God is.

What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? A life of luxury and sensuality? You thought the prophets of God were called to a life of comfort and ease? Far from it! The prophets of God are called to a life of self-sacrifice. They are called upon to give up everything for the sake of God's Kingdom. If you want a spectacle of luxury, go to the kings' palaces, to the rulers of this world, to the very people John the Baptist is preaching against. Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces, but the ambassadors of the King of kings and Lord of lords are dressed in camel hair and preaching out in the desert. And as for the King and Lord Himself: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Jesus has called His disciples to a life of suffering which He Himself has also endured. "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master" (Matthew 10:24). He calls to us: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). The crosses in our lives are designed by

God simply to conform us closer to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). That goes for John the Baptist and that goes for you, too.

“What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.” John the Baptist is a prophet. He foresees and foretells the coming one, our Lord Jesus Christ. But he’s also more than a prophet because He actually beholds the fulfillment of prophecy before his very eyes. The other prophets of the Old Testament saw Jesus by faith. John the Baptist saw Jesus with his very eyes. John the Baptist could stand there in the Jordan River and say: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Take a look at your bulletin cover. There’s John the Baptist, a prophet who is more than a prophet, pointing to the Lamb of God, taking away the sins of the world in His death on the cross. John the Baptist is simply the messenger who came to prepare the Lord’s way by baptizing with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

This morning, you witnessed just such a Baptism. We rejoice because Jonas has now entered the life of repentance and faith prepared for the baptized. Jonas now lives in the forgiveness of sins. He has been rescued from death and the devil and he now has the hope of eternal life. But Jonas’s baptism, like every Christian Baptism, is not a one and done event. It’s an ongoing reality that will lead Jonas into eternity. His journey has just begun. Now comes a lifetime of learning the faith, of learning to repent of his sins and learning to receive the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ on a daily basis at home and on a weekly basis at church. That’s your life, too. Jonas has been baptized into the death of Christ, buried with Jesus by Baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, Jonas, too, might walk in newness of life (Rom 6). That newness of life begins today and the Church is here to support Jonas and his family every step of the way.

The life of the baptized is not easy. Becoming a child of God puts a target on your back and the enemy will do everything in its power to drag you back into the darkness of unbelief. There is a spiritual war raging all around us and Jonas has just joined our ranks as a soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim 2:4). The struggle ahead is real, for him and for you. At times it will be painful. You will suffer for the faith, at times even like John the Baptist, for confessing the faith once delivered to the saints. But take heart! Those who have gone before us have suffered in the same way, as have all the prophets of God and Jesus Himself. Remember that in Christ, you can rejoice even in suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Rejoice in the midst of repentance, knowing that the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world also takes away your sin. Rejoice in the Lord always, O baptized children of God; again I will say: "Rejoice!" In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.