“Adventing”
Text: Luke 7:18-28; Philippians 4:4-7; Zephaniah 3:14-20

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

Today is joy Sunday. The third Sunday of Advent. We lit the oddly-colored candle on the Advent wreath today, the rose-colored candle, the joy candle. For with this Sunday we have turned a corner. Advent is now more than halfway over and our remembrance of Christmas is close. And so the call rings out today for joy! Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul wrote. Rejoice and exult with all your heart, the prophet Zephaniah proclaimed. And Joy to the World we’ll sing soon. And how appropriate, then, to have a baptism, too. For a baptism is always a joyous occasion. Seeing God and His promises in action.

But the readings we heard today weren’t all joy . . . or so it seems. For there doesn’t seem to be much joy in the Gospel we heard. John the Baptist is in prison. His crime? Speaking truth to power. Calling a king to repentance. And pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). For that, John was imprisoned. For that, John would be beheaded. Maybe even before his disciples had returned from asking Jesus their question: Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? For things don’t seem to be working out as they thought, or hoped, or planned. John languishing in prison isn’t the way this was supposed to end up! They thought.

But to think there is no joy in the Gospel today is to misread it. For there is great joy there! The joy of the blind who could now see again. The joy of the lame who could walk and run. The joy of the lepers who were cleansed and could hug and kiss their loved ones again. The joy of those families who had their loved ones back from the dead. The joy of the poor who had the good news preached to them. Wherever Jesus went, He brought joy. He is fulfilling all the prophecies spoken of the Messiah. And that doesn’t change just because John is in prison . . . and even if he’s been there for some time.

And this, too: Is it possible that John is filled with joy, too? He sends his disciples to Jesus with a question, but is it his question? Or did he send his disciples to teach them? That’s what good teachers do. They don’t give you a straight answer, they point you to it; lead you to it; tell you where to find it. John’s whole life was about pointing people to Jesus - why stop now? As he said: Now that Jesus has come, He must increase and he, John, must decrease (John 3:30). And that was good. Jesus needs to be the one people remember, not John. Jesus needs to be the one people go to, not John. Jesus needs to be
the one people follow, not John. So John decreasing, John fading away, *that's a good thing*. John was just the forerunner. It’s kind of like at a wedding, after the bride walks down the aisle, you don’t need the runner or the rose petals anymore. Their job is done. They can go away now. So too, John.

And then consider this: when the apostle Paul wrote the words we heard today, *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!* he himself was in prison. His crime the same as John’s: speaking truth to power and proclaiming Jesus as the promised Saviour. But even in prison, he writes words of confidence, joy, and hope. And it wasn’t the first time for him. Paul had been in prison before this. In fact, in the same city he was now writing to, the city of Philippi. He had been thrown there with Silas after having their clothes torn off, being beaten silly with rods, and then they had their feet put in the stocks in the inner prison. And yet that night, we are told, Paul and Silas were singing hymns! And so when Paul writes *rejoice in the Lord always*, it’s almost like he reminding the Philippians of that time he was in prison, rejoicing. And telling them that they, too, can rejoice. No matter what is happening to them now. No matter what conflict or suffering, obstacle or opposition they are facing. The joy of the Lord is greater than all of that.

Because we’re always going to have those things - conflict, suffering, obstacles, opposition. Sin will see to that. We try to minimize them, avoid them, but still they come. You know it. So the question is: *what do you do when they do?* Do you doubt God and His love? Or do you rejoice in His promises? His promise not that you’ll have an easy life, but that He’ll be with you through it all. That even in prison, even in suffering, even in death, you won’t be alone.

You see, that’s what Advent is all about, which this day of joy reminds us of. Not just rejoicing, **but rejoicing in the promises of God**.

That’s the joy of Christmas. Not Christmas the holiday, but the first Christmas. The joy of Mary when she proclaimed the words of the Magnificat: *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit* - what? - *rejoices in God my Savior* *(Luke 1:46-47)*. For God was fulfilling His promise of a Saviour. The world’s Saviour, Mary’s Saviour. Though it meant hardship for Mary, still she rejoiced. And the joy of that first Christmas for the shepherds, as they got to see their baby Saviour. And the joy of the angels which reflected the Father’s own joy at the human birth of His eternal Son. There may have been no room in the inn, but that couldn’t stop the joy of that night.

And that’s the joy we have as God fulfills His promises to us now. His promise of forgiveness. His promise to be with us in our trials and troubles. The joy of baptism, even though it paint a rather large bulls-eye on our back for satan’s arrows. And the joy of repentance - which sounds funny, right? For how can repentance be joyful? But it really is when it is done within God’s promise of forgiveness. For as the apostle John would write: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. No joy
either. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9). There’s the joy! Forgiveness, cleansing, righteousness. The monkey off our backs. The skeletons out of our closets. No more hiding. Our backwards lives put right again. Gifts of God. The promises of God fulfilled.

That’s the joy King Herod missed out on when he closed his ears to John’s preaching and instead beheaded him. That’s the joy Paul’s jailer wanted when he heard him and Silas joyfully singing in prison. That’s the joy John wanted his disciples to have when he sent them to Jesus. And that’s the joy Jesus wants for you and has for you! If you’re a sinner. If you’re broken. If you’re downtrodden by this world and life. If you’re struggling. If you’re lonely or feel like you’re in a kind of prison yourself. If that’s you, then Jesus is here for you. To be with you through all that. For He laid in the manger to go to the cross. He was baptized a sinner so that you sinners be washed clean. He laid in the tomb to rise from it alive. And He ascended to come again. To advent again. To take you home where your joy will be full.

And just as His other promises were fulfilled, so will that one be too. Maybe soon.

But until that day, blessed in the one who is not offended by me, Jesus says. Blessed is that wonderful gift word when God bestows on you all His gifts, all that you need. The blessed that comes only to sinners, to the broken, to the downtrodden, to the struggling, to the lonely, to those locked up in sin. To those who need a Saviour. He has come to bless you. And His blessing is far greater than anything that can be found in this world and life. For by worldly standards, Jesus said, among those born of women none is greater than John. So that means Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Donald Trump, Nancy Pelosi, Martin Luther, Pope Francis - sorry! John is greater than you, and all of you put together! But you can be greater than John, no matter who you are. For the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. Or in other words, the one to whom Jesus comes, advents, the one who Jesus makes His child, is greater than anyone or anything else in this world and life.

And in Baptism, Jesus is coming, adventing, to you. In His Word of forgiveness, Jesus in coming, adventing, to you. And here in His Body and Blood, Jesus is coming, adventing, to you. To make you His own, His child. To give you a place in heaven. To forgive your sins. To give you Himself, and His joy. Advent joy. Promises fulfilled joy.

So maybe we need to coin a new term today. Young people today, when they grow up and begin taking on responsibility are now said to be adulting. They’re doing those things adults do. They’re being adults. So maybe for us, today, we can be adventing. When we have repentant joy, we’re adventing. When we rejoice in the Lord always, we’re adventing. When we rejoice in being a child of God, we’re adventing. When we sing in the midst of sadness, when we’re confident in the midst of suffering, when we forgive those who sin against us, we’re adventing. We’re being Advent Christians - sinners to
whom our Lord has come, *advented*, and given us Himself. *Adventing* in hospitals and sickrooms, *adventing* in prisons and with friends in trouble, *adventing* when things aren’t working out as you thought, or hoped, or planned. *Adventing*. Knowing that you’re not alone, you’re not forsaken, you’re not without hope. For your Saviour has *advented* to you. And that makes all the difference in the world.

*Adventing*. That’s what Zephaniah did. That’s what Paul did. That’s what John did. And you too. What they are, you now are. What they did, you now do. For blessed are they, and blessed are you, in Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.