

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, rejoice. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. Rejoice. AMEN.

Rejoice was the first word of the opening, the introit, of the mass in Catholic and Anglican practice on third Advent, but it had been *Gaudete*, Rejoice in Latin, and so this is *Gaudete* Sunday. Since it is Rejoice Sunday, like *Laetare* Sunday in Lent, Lighten up Sunday or refreshment Sunday. In Advent, the rejoicing takes the form of pink instead of purple to relax the mode of repentance. Our church hangings do reflect that purple/pink color-coding, but the ancient English practice from Sarum chose blue for our Lady, blue for sky and sea, blue for workers' clothing. There is no need to lighten or relieve the blue Marian understanding, but some stoles often combine some pink in the blue, for this Sunday. We reflect this rejoicing by singing Mary's Song, the *Magnificat*. Her voice is one voice of praise and service along with John's voice.

It is rare to have two distinct, real personal voices on a Sunday. Mary says, "my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my savior." John says what he is not: not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet, and he is equally clear what he does do. He cries in the wilderness; he baptizes with water, he is not worthy to untie the sandals of the One who is to come.

However, he was the first unconnected (not Mary) to meet and identify that One to come. He was in Elizabeth's womb and Jesus was in Mary's womb. The two women met, layered in flowing dresses, and John leapt in his mother's womb sensing and recognizing his cousin, his Savior, his Lord. They didn't meet, apparently, until the occasion where he acknowledged Jesus and baptized him.

John the Baptist is such a large-scale person. Today's collect starts with such energy: "Stir up your power in us and with great might come among us" — doesn't that sound like John. His preaching was vigorous and in this time of anxiety and hope, he urged people to come for a baptism of repentance, to prepare for the One who was to come. He knew who that was. He knew him, but how to convey that reality to others. He, of all people, knew that the promised one was really coming, had already begun his life's work and travels. That knowledge impelled his feelings of urgency and preaching a nearly desperate call to repentance. He could convey a kind of reckless or outrageous need to prepare for the coming One, because he knew who the person was and that he was near and nearer.

Mary too felt a sword pierce her heart, and knew not only who Jesus was, but knew that he was neither going to have a long, easy life, but also that he would die of his youthful commitment to speaking out for justice to the poor and for the poor. Also she knew the facts of his birth and how wondrous his creation was. She announces not the need for fear or repentance, but an immediate need to rejoice and celebrate the wonders of God's new work in the world.

John the Baptizer and Mary, his mother surround Jesus, both knowing who he was and is, and having to adjust their own lives in light of that strange but new reality. They each knew that not only were they not the One, but that Jesus was the One, and that he was real, and right there. For John in this part of John's Gospel—remember, that John's Gospel is often inserted to deliver theology, more than simpler narratives. John "confessed and did not deny" that he was Messiah. He also "said and "answered" the same. He gave four ways and strengths to make clear who he was not. There

is an anthem that illustrates the tone and strength of each of these small phrases in sound, in direct ways. He does give his answer about who he is and what he'll be doing, and the music wanders in a persuasive, open, and sure way. The writer Larry Woiwode writes this in his memoir *What I Think I Did*, about memory and story. He suggests that the knitting together of incidents into story, making them matter, is an act of faith, an acknowledgment that "We are headed somewhere and it's our story that carries us forward in its wake. If I (Woiwode continues) weren't headed toward eternity (as I see it at times), I wouldn't have a story to tell." When I read this quotation, it sounded to me like John the Baptist's conviction in answering his various questioners. He told his questioners his story, knowing full well that he was heading towards eternity, and that knowledge would carry him not only forward, but also through whatever life could bring him. The eternity he was heading towards, he already had experienced before he was born.

What do these accounts of John the Baptist's response to questions about his identity and his identification of the One to come, and Mary's response to the incarnation, the coming of the One have to do with us or how we live? We live in hope and expectation. As we live our days and contemplate our individual and communal lives, we think of vision, mission, and values. As we contemplate that trio of shaping principles, we live in hope. We think of John the Baptist's excitement at who he wasn't. He knew both that that he wasn't Messiah, and that Messiah was real, living, and Jesus. Perhaps some of us vacillate in our thinking. It's easiest to say out loud that we know, I know, I'm not, we're not Messiah, but it's hard sometimes to really live into that simple fact. We want to fix things beyond our fixing. We want to leap tall

buildings in single bound. We want to make people well, or better yet not to be sad, sick, or something else not ideal for them. Even though Jesus didn't do an infinite amount of that sort of fixing, we long to do that, whether in his name or our own. Nope, not Messiah.

Harder, though sometimes is understanding, accepting and including Jesus in our lives. How do we "let go and let God"? So many things we see suggest that "it's a badly managed world," in the words of a friend who teaches church history and more. We were asked in a Fresh Start, diocesan meeting "How do you deal with/ or what do you do about the Advent police in your parish?" Priests talked about moving pageants to Christmas Eve, sneaking in a Christmas carol and so on. We all, all, knew what the question meant—the focus, religiously, if you will, on Advent, on John the Baptist, on repentance and preparation.

Someone said to me that in the world, in our regular lives, we are assaulted by Christmas, this year from before Halloween, but we here avoid any mention of Christmas until the 24th. Then we'll sing carols and rejoice, but we'll all have about had it, in our ears by then. We will sing Christmas carols through Christmastide but aside from "after Christmas sales," Christmas will be done in the culture by the 26th. We'll almost miss the event.

John the Baptist recognized the coming of the Christ. He knew it was real, immanent, and already present—and eternal. His preparation, like ours, involved work and worry. Would he be ready, have done enough, be worthy enough? Never ready enough, never worthy enough, always living in hope and expectation. We can do that.

Our Lady, though, knew from the instant she experienced her understanding of what was happening. She rejoiced. She

praised God and rejoiced in her life. She was not so unimaginative as not to “get” the consequences for her child, for her, for the world of the incarnation. Nonetheless her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior. We really do know what is to come. We know about the incarnation. We know the joy of Christmas. That’s our hope in eternity, our shaping of our own story in hope, in work, in preparation, in weariness, in full knowledge of unworthiness. Christmas is not to come as a big surprise but to be the realization of long expectation. John the Baptist suggests who we are and how we are to live, but it is Our Lady who demonstrates what our reaction is to be today, everyday and always. We know that Christmas is coming. We know about God’s gift of incarnation, and we’re trying our best to think about our mission here, our vision here, our values here that honor God’s gift to us. We know the story and we rejoice in the Lord always. We give thanks always, and we rejoice in the Good News.

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