

## Rejoicing in the Unexpected

You may have noticed that the third candle we lit this morning is a different color from the blue of the past two weeks ... and no, it isn't pink. This is Gaudete Sunday, one of two feast days in our liturgical year when we use the color rose to symbolize joyful anticipation. (The other is Laetare Sunday, which occurs in the middle of Lent.) Gaudete Sunday roughly marks the middle of Advent. For those who aren't Latin scholars, Gaudete means "rejoice jubilantly."

Thanks to John the Baptist, we spent last week talking about repenting, not rejoicing. We first saw John baptizing his followers with water for repentance while promising that the coming Messiah would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. He specifically targeted the Pharisees and Sadducees, warning them that, unless they repented of their prideful ways, the Messiah would burn them in unquenchable flames.

John is back in this morning's Gospel, and in no mood to rejoice. Last week's reading was nine chapters back, so John has had plenty of time to watch Jesus at work. Jesus's ministry has flourished and his fame has grown as John's fortunes have declined. Taken captive by King Herod, John is in prison, awaiting his eventual execution. That doesn't seem to be John's primary concern, though. Whatever he's seen and heard about Jesus's ministry has made him question whether he was right to welcome our Lord as the Messiah. Unable to confront Jesus himself, John sends messengers to ask, "Are you the one that is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus isn't what John expected, and the Baptist isn't especially pleased.

Jesus's reply is mild enough, but there's steel beneath it. He asks the messengers to tell John about the many healing miracles he has performed, a not-so-subtle reminder that the Hebrew prophecies promised more than just retribution against Israel's oppressors. Then, Jesus says, "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." It's not quite an order to back off, but it

suggests that Jesus isn't especially troubled by John's disappointment. Although he thinks highly of John, Jesus's priorities are different than John's, and they don't involve dispensing fiery payback to the Sanhedrin, King Herod or Rome.

John's disappointment is, in some ways, surprisingly modern. We live in a time when it's remarkably easy to get exactly what you want – if you can afford to pay for it—and the choices are almost limitless. Remember when coffee only came with a choice of cream and sugar? When cities had only one daily paper, so everyone got the same news? When Henry Ford launched the Model-T, famously joking that you could buy it in any color you liked so long as it was black? There's a lot to be said for the range of choices that are offered to us in almost every area of our lives these days. But one of the unfortunate side effects of all those choices is that too many of us have developed inflexible expectations, becoming very insistent that we only want exactly what we prefer. Growing up, I had an aunt who, when asked what she wanted for her birthday or Christmas, would give my poor mother a detailed list of specified items right down to the SKU numbers. Anything Mom gave her that wasn't on the list would go straight back to the store, no matter how lovely it was. Her "I only want exactly what I want" mindset has become quite common. That may account for the popularity of gift cards – they allow the recipient to buy exactly what he or she wants while reflecting a little more effort than just sticking a check or some cash in a card.

But there's a problem with inflexible expectations, and it's not just that they make life miserable for anyone who has to try and meet them. People who have inflexible expectations can lose the ability to appreciate just what a blessing the unexpected can be. Take John, for example. He was so committed to his expectation that the Messiah would be a warrior king who would forcibly drive the Romans out of Israel that he couldn't rejoice when the actual Messiah was

performing miracles all over Judea. Jesus didn't use his hands to slam a mighty fist into the face of Caiaphas, Herod or Pilate. In Jesus's hands, the blind received their sight, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed, the deaf gained their hearing, the poor were given good news, and the dead were restored to life. Jesus didn't just liberate Israel with military might. He liberated all of us through a monumental, personal sacrifice that no one could have seen coming. For all the prophecies that he fulfilled, Jesus was nothing if not unexpected. And thank God for it, because he was so much more than what John and other prophets had in mind. A warrior Messiah would have triumphed for a time, but only for a while and only in Israel. Our Messiah triumphed for all time, and for all people. And that's *definitely* reason to rejoice.

That takes us back to Gaudete Sunday. Although she doesn't appear in today's Gospel, Gaudete and Laetare Sundays are a time honor Mary, the peasant girl who became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit and gave birth to the Son of God in all his humanity. Could anything have been more unexpected than that? Mary's holy pregnancy jeopardized her engagement, her reputation, even her life. But, as we hear in the song she sang to her cousin Elizabeth, the elderly woman who miraculously gave birth to John the Baptist, Mary knew how to rejoice. Her song celebrates the greatness of our God, a god who scatters the proud, uplifts the lowly, and fills the hungry with good things while the rich go away empty. Mary understood what John, perhaps, did not: God's greatness lies not only in his justice, but especially in his mercy. Divine mercy is the hallmark of Jesus's ministry. He came to heal, to bring hope, to shower a suffering humanity with grace, and to turn the injustices of the world upside down. Jesus triumphed, not by force of arms, but by the irresistible power of love.

None of this is to criticize John or any of the other prophets who foresaw the Messiah has a military leader. John was a holy man, a visionary whom Jesus himself praised as a prophet and

more. John stood firm in his faith and scorned the self-indulgent comforts of the wealthy. He was keenly aware of how his people suffered under Roman occupation and of how little Herod and the Temple authorities did to relieve their pain. But he was also a man of his time, living in a world where the best way to right a wrong was often to attack it with brute force. Our modern world may not be all that different.

Unexpected things happen, and they aren't always reason to rejoice: natural disasters, accidents, illness, death. Even when you know they're coming, there's always something unexpected about them and grief can hit unexpectedly hard. There's no way to rejoice at the loss of someone we love even if we sincerely believe, as our faith tells us, that death isn't an ending, but a transition into another place where, with God's grace, we'll meet each other again.

I would never suggest that we rejoice when tragedy hits. But in this Advent season, it's still good to rejoice in the unexpected blessings that come our way, even in the midst of tragedy, when our eyes and hearts are open enough to them. When Jesus said that we need to become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven, perhaps he was talking in part about the way kids revel in the unexpected before they get old enough for their preferences to harden. Maybe it's easier for God to bless us if we're willing to gratefully accept what we're given instead of always insisting on having only and exactly what we think we want.

There are only two weeks left in this Advent season, just fourteen days before Christmas comes and goes in the flash of one hectic, magnificent day. My prayer for each and every one of you, here and at home online, is that God will surprise you with an unexpected blessing some time in the next two weeks. May it astonish you, may it delight you, may it comfort you, and may you rejoice to know that God, in his infinite mercy, has plans and blessings far better for you than you could ever imagine for yourself. Jesus is coming – Gaudete. Gaudete. *Amen.*