

REPENT AND REJOICE



Isaiah 61:1 "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners . . . I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God.

As we move into the third Sunday of Advent, we begin to see a light at the end of this seasonal tunnel. For Christmas is an only week away now. Still, we are not quite there yet. So, in our first reading today, the prophet Isaiah says the Lord God has anointed him to preach good news to the oppressed. All is well; God is at hand. These are words of hope and consolation from the prophet, but they must have been hard to hear at that time, given that they were spoken to a people exiled in the far away land of Babylon, perhaps never to return.

"Rejoice" is also the first word we hear from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Again, we are assured that the Lord is at

hand and not to worry about anything. And yet again *these* words come from St. Paul while he was sitting in a prison cell in Rome, awaiting his trial and eventual martyrdom. The Good News of Advent is that God is coming to God's people, to you and to me, that God's promises are being fulfilled. But that we are not quite there yet.

And we know *that* when we hear the voice of John the Baptist in our Gospel today, a voice crying out in the wilderness, we know that the Kingdom of God is about to draw one step closer. But John doesn't proclaim, 'rejoice' as the others had; rather John the Baptist says, 'repent'. Paul told the Philippians not to be anxious about anything; John tells his hearers to flee from the wrath to come. ---- and I have to wonder, though, if John's message is not as different from the first two readings as we might imagine. The promise that comes with Christ entering our lives does indeed open the door for a new life, a new way of living, but at the same time it presents new responsibilities. If we truly hope to rejoice in the gift of the Christ child at Christmas, everything will have to change. We will have to change. And through us, the world around us must change, too.

The crowd that gathered around John on the banks of the Jordan River were of Jewish heritage, making self-satisfied claims for themselves based on their lineage as sons of Abraham. They attempted to get by as the Lord's chosen people. But that

didn't always work for them, as the exiles in Babylon could attest. You'd think that John would be ecstatic at the thousands of people climbing out of the river, drying themselves off, signing themselves up as the new and improved People of God. But he won't let it rest! He didn't care if they had a family tree that goes back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He didn't care if they made the effort to show up, or if they participated with gusto in this act of baptism. What John demanded was that their lives become transformed, that their lives become turned toward different priorities than they had before. He was not interested in people's roots, their membership cards, their family connections, or their lineage. He was interested in their fruits: what they were going to do *now* with this new life God had wrought. Listen carefully again to the words of the absolution I use after our Confession on Sunday mornings. I not only ask that God grant us absolution and remission of all our sins, but I also then ask that God grants us time for true repentance, and amendment of our lives, and then the grace and consolation of God's Holy Spirit.

That's one of the things I like about John the Baptist. He calls us to repentance and cares enough to insist that we get it right, so that we *can* rejoice. He doesn't care who we are, where we come from, or how we've always done things. John gets right into our faces like the best friend we ever had and demands that

we not only repent of our sins, that we also turn our lives around, and our hearts, not partially, but fully, towards God.

"What should we do?" the crowd asks John at one time. He tells them to share with people in need. He tells the tax collectors not to cheat, and the soldiers not to abuse their authority. These were life-changing but necessary demands, building blocks for constructing the kingdom of God here and now. He tells them to do differently than they have done before and by doing so; they will help God change the world. He does not try to make their lives easy. Instead, he invites them to make their lives holy.

What about us? Like his prophet John, God does not care about our roots, but God cares passionately about our fruits, about what we are doing with our lives. "So, you believe in me," God says. "How is the rest of the world to know? Make your life worthy of my people --- Look around. Find a need and fill it! Are you spending lots of time and energy on your loved ones at this time of year? That's fine. But caring about the people closest to you, your family, your friends, your colleagues at work, that's not a radical sign of the kingdom of God coming into the world. Be lavish instead to the stranger! Show mercy to the outcast or to those you will never meet! Prioritize your gift list to include first the poor, the hungry, the isolated,

those who can never repay you." So, who's at the top of your Christmas list?

We are promised a lifetime of rejoicing when we repent and we allow ourselves to be open to how Christ would use us in the world today. We are promised a lifetime of rejoicing when we put aside our preoccupation with roots and pedigrees and our orthodoxy, and the ways we've always done things before, and we work instead to bear the abundant fruit of good works. We are promised a lifetime of rejoicing when, for the love of God, we find a need and we fill it, when, for the love of God, we find a hurt and we comfort it, just as Christ did in coming among us. Thus, may we all spend our remaining Advent days learning to live lives worthy of the repentant people that we are called to be, in order to change the world, so that we all can truly rejoice at the coming of our Messiah. AMEN