



12/13/2020 Joy Restored
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

The third Sunday of Advent—also known as Rejoice (Gaudete) Sunday—is one in which the church has rejoiced as the advent of the Messiah draws nearer. The whole Church seems to skip with excitement at the thought that we’re almost there. We are filled with anticipation at what the Day of the Lord will look like, the day when we will see the Lord face to face.

In today’s readings, Isaiah couples images of a people restored with images of weddings and springtime and oak trees. Though the people had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they continued to face hardship and oppression. Moved by the spirit of God, Isaiah announces deliverance for those who are oppressed and comfort for those who mourn. The psalmist, in turn, pairs up the good news of restoration with images of a harvest festival: God is turning our mourning into laughter and shouts of joy. Paul urges us to rejoice “always.” He concludes his letter to the Thessalonians by encouraging them to live lives of continual joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. The closing blessing, which he offers, is grounded in the hope of Christ’s coming. In the gospel, John the Baptist, in his own way, calls for rejoicing by his humble acknowledgment that he is not what we are waiting for. John’s job is simply to bear witness to the Messiah. He reminds us that there can be joy in taking our proper place, and points to Jesus.

John the Baptist is an unusual figure and as such has inspired many different depictions in visual art. In the seventeenth-century Russian icon called, “St. John the Baptist, Angel of the Desert,” John is depicted with large wings like an angel’s. The painter has probably meant to symbolize John’s status as a divine messenger. In fact, the word “angel” means messenger and he has certainly been a herald of God as he proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. He also lived a simple life of prayer, not being mindful of material needs, but with his attention fixed firmly on God’s promises.¹

Writing for The Christian Century magazine, Lutheran pastor, author, and theologian, Richard Lischer, shares this about Advent. “Before Advent is a word,” he writes, “it is a sigh. A voice crying. A mood. And never more deeply felt than in these troubled months. Advent marks both the exhaustion and the hope of God’s people, when the meaning of our lives is expressed in a weary exhalation of ordinary breath and then a sharp intake of something greater.”

This year we have plenty to mourn for. Collectively, we are taking stock of our losses. We mourn the over 291,000 dead in the USA and over 1,500,000 world-wide. We mourn our pre-pandemic way of life. We are tired of the news of more people being hospitalized and more doctors and nurses exhausted and stretched beyond their physical and emotional capacity. We are tired of the restrictions on travel and on family gatherings this holiday season. Many around us are physically and mentally drained as they try to manage the demands of on-line learning and zoom meetings, economic stagnation, health risks at work, long lines at the food bank, mortgage default, car dispossession, and looming eviction notices. We are impatient for the day a vaccine will be available to all. Will that become another political sparring tool?

¹ [Why does John the Baptist have wings in Orthodox icons? | A Reader's Guide to Orthodox Icons \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.wordpress.com)



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We easily resonate with the Scripture readings we meditate on during Advent: they are a dramatic appeal for deliverance. We long for Emmanuel, God with us, to show up in the midst of our suffering world. Our souls yearn for the long-awaited Messiah, who has assured us of his Second Coming to restore our broken world and our wounded relationships. We gasp for that Second Coming as many parts of the world gasp for clean air and oxygenated oceans. We need renewal. The planet needs renewal. We wait in keen anticipation for the beauty and the joy that God's kingdom will bring.

How do we bear witness while still waiting? Where do we get the strength to hope? Where do we experience joy? Can hope and joy in the midst of waiting be that very witness? And, finally, can we be a *joyous* witness even as we go through this season of covid-19?

Theologian and black studies scholar, Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones writes "John quotes Isaiah at a moment in the prophetic text where a distinctive shift occurs. God's voice rings out through Isaiah to a people still living under exilic conditions, to a people whose capital is still under occupation, to a people who are in the midst of desolation. While they are faced with the quotidian despair of their most immediate realities, God snaps them back into hope and promise. Have you not seen? Have you not heard? God stops and takes time to offer comfort, tenderness, solace, and strength for the journey ahead."²

It is like God is inviting the people of Israel to look beyond the present moment, beyond themselves. John does the same. When those who question him try to pin him down, he points beyond himself to someone bigger than him. The questions raised are not motivated by respect or sincere inquiry. The Pharisees act more as gatekeepers of the status quo than as seekers of a truer reality; they want to know who he is not because they are interested in his captivating message but because they want him to declare that he is no one of true consequence, no one as great as the Messiah or the prophets, no one to really pay attention to. In fact, they were not really interested in following Jesus anyway. They probably just wanted to discredit him before the crowd and seize an easy excuse to justify their unbelief.

John remains steadfast despite the undertone of critique and feels comfortable with saying only who he is not. He maintains his commitment to the power of God and to manifesting his message through the work of transformation and liberation. He is marked by raw authenticity and deep humility. He isn't interested in making a name for himself nor does he look for affirmation from systems committed to anything other than freedom. John lives by the freedom, the hope, and the joy of the kingdom of God. In his heart he knows and accepts who he is and is true to his mission. He also knows intimately the One who is to come and is already here. He points others to Jesus.

² Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones, Citation Matters, The Christian Century, December 13, 2020.



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But John does not simply speak to the pharisees. He speaks to us also in our time of waiting and anticipation. We know Jesus. Yet, at the same time, we don't know him. Yes, we have had our spiritual encounters with him, but we have yet to see, hear, or touch him. We know Christ will come again; we just don't know when. Jesus told us we will find him, hold him, and serve him in those at the margins of society. Could that be his Second Coming? Would that be an expression of his Second Coming?

When Christ does arrive, will we recognize him? John tells the priests and Levites, "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me." Could those words be intended for us as well? Are we so preoccupied with distractions that I don't notice the one who is among us? God is here, yet we are also waiting for the complete restoration of the world to the way God wants it to be.

We continue to wait, and this waiting is not easy, especially during a pandemic. But we know the One we are waiting for. He is the One who restores our peace and our joy. Can our waiting be productive and prepare a way for the Lord? How about taking a picture of something that you find interesting and beautiful and attaching it to a note to a friend or family member, especially to those we would normally spend the holidays with? How about writing a note to someone who has no family left?

In a world that constantly demands we say something about ourselves, what does it mean to use our social platforms, our affluence, our social positioning to amplify something greater than our personal endeavors, our achievements, our latest acquisitions? How about this Advent we follow John's example and point at Jesus in the socially disadvantaged, in the unprotected worker, the refugee, the sexually trafficked child, the lonely grandparent, the physically and emotionally abused mother, and the incarcerated father? Can we find ways to speak of them to our leaders? A place to start is to check out the ELCA advocacy page and sign up for their newsletter and alerts,³ or check the work of the FL Council of Churches and become familiar with the ecumenical work of all churches to address poverty and injustice.⁴

Another way to prepare ourselves is to pick up good books such as Pope Francis' new book, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, published Dec. 1. The Pope comments on the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as controversial topics such as military spending, abortion, police violence, the treatment of migrants and refugees, protest movements and the role of women. "The astonishing amounts spent on the arms trade could be used to feed the whole of the human race and school every child," he laments. "Arms spending destroys humanity." He also recalls his 2015 address to the U.S. Congress, in which he condemned capital punishment and expresses shock that "even Christians try to justify it."

³ [Advocacy - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America \(elca.org\)](https://www.elca.org/advocacy)

⁴ [Home - Florida Council of Churches \(floridachurches.org\)](https://www.floridachurches.org/)



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Francis also believes COVID-19 should be taken seriously. He notes that the pandemic has hit women harder "because they are more likely to be on the front line of the pandemic" as health care workers. They are also "harder hit economically."

Let us close with a word of prayer: Almighty God, you are the only source of health and healing. In you there is calm, and the only true peace in the universe. Grant to each one of us your children an awareness of your presence and give us perfect confidence in you. In all pain and weariness and anxiety teach us to yield ourselves to your never-failing care, knowing that your love and power surround us, trusting in your wisdom and providence to give us health and strength and peace when your time is best; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.