

December 17, 2023
Third Sunday of Advent
Gaudete Sunday, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

In the Name of God, whose coming we await. Amen.

*Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I say, rejoice!*¹ For centuries, these were the first words sung on this Third Sunday of Advent. We still use the Latin to call today Gaudete Sunday; it could, just as easily, be called Rejoice Sunday.

There is a change of mood from the readings of the past several weeks as we slowly turn our eyes toward Christmas. Today, instead of hearing calls to repentance, we are commanded to rejoice! Something new is afoot. All four of today's readings are about new futures beginning to take shape.

Over the past several weeks, we've been hearing about the children of Judah exiled in Babylon. In today's Psalm, we hear them returning home. People who never thought they would see Jerusalem are singing:

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
then we were like those in a dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy!*

It is to this liberated and restored people that Isaiah speaks words of rejoicing, words of a new beginning.

*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;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

¹ *Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.* Philippians 4:4.

These are familiar words. St. Luke tells us about Jesus speaking them in the synagogue at Nazareth, but that is for another sermon.

Isaiah is proclaiming to the returned exiles a year of the Lord's favor. God was not simply restoring the fortunes of Zion; God was reversing them. The "year of the Lord's favor" the Jubilee, was a kind of divine "do-over" that had its origins in the 25th chapter of Leviticus.

The Jubilee represented a reversal of fortune, based on the notion that the land was not one's to possess, "for the land is mine [says God]; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev. 25:23).

Jubilee has a complicated relationship with both Sabbath and Sabbath Year. Richard H. Lowery writes that they all celebrate "a divinely ordained cosmic order built on natural abundance, self-restraint, and social solidarity," and serve as a critique of "the oppressive consequences of a royal-imperial system built on tribute, forced labor, and debt slavery."²

By mandating rest, release, and reversal, of land, money, and people, God was trying to keep things from going off the rails, to thwart the accumulation of wealth and political power in the hands of a few. We are commanded to treat others fairly. But, when we try to cheat, God is there to help us not to.

For that one year in fifty, everything was turned upside down. You were able to – you had to – live differently. You could turn in ashes and get a garland of flowers, or swap the oil of mourning for the oil of gladness, you might come in with tears but you would go out with shouts of joy!

I wonder if, by commanding Jubilee, God thought, hoped, that we might, eventually, learn how to live as we were created to live. Until that day, Jubilee represents God's dream of justice for us, God's dream of transformation for us. And when God is up to the business of transformation, there's not very much that turns out the way we would expect... and for that we should rejoice!

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In today's gospel, we also have the anticipation of something transformative. Here again is John the Baptist, this time from the perspective of John the Evangelist. There he is, out in the wilderness, baptizing people in the muddy waters of the Jordan, and drawing huge crowds. Anyone drawing crowds makes the establishment nervous.

² Richard H. Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (St. Louis: Chalice Press), 2000, p. 3. This book is a helpful discussion of the relationship between Sabbath, Sabbath Year, and Jubilee.

As a reaction, the gospel writer tells us, the Jews sent priests and Levites down from Jerusalem to ask him “who are you?”

These are not low-level party operatives; these are religious VIPs. Unlike the crowds, they had not come to hear John’s proclamation or to be baptized. Their mission was much more pointed. They had questions, and they wanted answers.

But John is not who the priests and Levites expected him to be. In fact, John becomes the man who is not. He is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah. He is not the Prophet.³ Instead, this popular preacher says, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

John knew what he was not. He also knew what he was: a forerunner, a pointer-outer, a witness to the Mystery that Luke describes as *the dawn from on high who shall break on us; to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.*

This was all upside down for the priests and Levites (and you and me, for that matter). John the Baptist had, until well into the first century, more followers than Jesus did. Yet there he was, saying, “don’t look at me, look past me.” This is hardly the behaviour we would expect of a popular preacher. Augustine of Hippo wrote, “John is the voice, but Christ was the Word. John is a voice for a time, but Christ is the eternal Word.”⁴

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But perhaps Augustine is a bit heady for a day that calls us to rejoice. So, let me invite you on a journey into “upside-down-ness” in your imagination with the help of Lewis Carroll’s 1865 novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.⁵

At the very beginning of the story, Alice spots a white rabbit. But it’s not an ordinary white rabbit, It is a white rabbit wearing a vest, and who looks at a pocket watch, and realizes that he’s late. This all makes him so interesting to Alice that when he pops down the rabbit hole, she follows him, “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.”

As Alice falls through the rabbit-hole into Wonderland, a very long fall indeed, she thinks, “I wonder if I shall fall right *through* the earth! How funny it’ll seem to come out among the people that walk upside down!” When she arrives in Wonderland at last, she doesn’t find that the people are upside down, but everything else is!

³ This refers to God’s promise to Moses to provide a prophet after Moses’ death. See Deuteronomy 18.

⁴ Augustine, Sermon 293, 1-3; PL 38, 1327-1328.

⁵ Thanks to Dianne Bergant, CSA, for her article in *America* (December 9, 2002) which was the inspiration for using Alice in relation to these readings.

The usual rules of size and politeness have all been reversed. In Wonderland, even food and beverage carry their own instructions – EAT ME, DRINK ME. It took some adjusting for Alice to make her way in this new topsy-turvy world.

The Scriptures remind us that God's world is a world of reversals, of things being upside down, not at all what we had expected. God's world is a world where the oppressed get good news, the brokenhearted are comforted and those who had wept now laugh – a world where the God and Creator of all is born in a stable.

God's world is a world transformed. And in order to enter the wondrous new world to which you and I are called we, like Alice, might have to change a bit here and there. We might need a little transformation of our own. "Make straight the way of the Lord!"

But talk of transformation or repentance, causes many of us throw up our hands in despair. Transforming the world just seems too much to think about – especially if we watch the news at all. But the transformation that God calls you to is much, much easier. You just need to be a bit more like Alice...and simply follow the white rabbit – or John the Baptist.

Or, simpler still, be aware that when you come to Holy Communion week after week, when you receive the One who gave himself for us, when you feast with and on the One who says, "Eat This" and "Drink This" you are already crossing the threshold into God's transformed world. For goodness' sake, give yourself permission to enjoy the ride!

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Advent is a time of expectation and hope as we wait for God's new and transformed world, as well as for the One who has the power to heal everything that is broken. Advent is also a time of joy and jubilee even in the deepest darkness of the year. St. Paul reminds us "The one who calls you is faithful, and God will do this." God restored the fortunes of Zion; God will surely continue to transform our lives.

If you are seeking to boost your rejoicing potential as we draw nearer to the light of Christmas, I have a few suggestions. Like John the Baptist did, witness to, point to, the Light. Bring good news to someone ... anyone. Proclaim liberty to somebody in prison – any sort of prison will do, they are countless. Give someone a garland instead of ashes; maybe that means a smile, instead of a snarky comeback. Any of these things will bring you as much joy as they bring to others. Lastly, leap with joy for the many new beginnings that God sets in your path – and let yourself be surprised, again and again and again.

Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I say, rejoice! May our mouths be filled with laughter, and our tongues with shouts of joy! Amen!