

## **Advent 3 Year B 2020**

### **December 13, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we light a rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath. Now, I have not always been a big fan of having the rose-colored candle, because it is a tradition that is no longer supported by our worship practices and selection of Advent Bible readings. But today, it kind of works. The reason for the rose-colored candle comes from a tradition in the 1950s and 60s when there were three violet candles and a rose candle in the Advent wreath. The understanding during Advent at that time was that it was a time of repentance and preparation, a highly penitential season. In many ways, Advent was like a mini-Lent. The violet candles signified this time of penance and repentance, and the rose-colored candle was used on the day when the proclamation of joy broke into this somber season. However, during the 1970s and 80s, the emphasis of Advent began to switch from somber repentance to a season of hope. We now celebrate in Advent a time of hopeful anticipation of the coming of Christ. Our cycle of readings has changed to reflect this understanding. The candles changed from violet and rose to four royal blue candles, representing the hope that comes with the color of the sky just as dawn is breaking.

Now, that being said, many churches still have a rose-colored candle in their wreath, and still celebrate this “Joy Sunday”. And, in fact, our readings this year fit well with that practice. “Rejoice always” our second lesson begins. And Isaiah proclaims that God is turning our mourning into laughing and shouts of joy. So, today, the rose-colored candle and theme of joy works with the message of our readings, however the hopefulness that is symbolized in the blue that decorates our worship space throughout Advent is also present in our reading from John as we hear of the light coming into our world and our hopefulness for the birth of Christ.

It is important to celebrate both hope and joy, especially right now, because there is so much to feel hopeless and down about in the world. We continue to struggle with the pandemic, with more around 10,000 individuals dying each day from the virus. Issues of racial injustice and continued turmoil surrounding the election also plague our nation. Many areas of the world remain at war, or are suffering the effects of a violent hurricane and wildfire season, or struggle with hunger and oppression. Just a few minutes of watching the news can leave us feeling hopeless and depressed. And it’s not that these aren’t important issues, we should absolutely be concerned about these things, but God also calls us to have hope and to rejoice always, even in the midst of suffering.

But it’s hard to have hope and joy. Because in addition to the hopelessness we may feel in relation to world events, we also face hopelessness and despair in our own lives. For many people, Advent and Christmas are not seasons of joy. Due to grief over the illness or death of a loved one, mourning broken relationships, loneliness, depression, anxiety, or the stress of the season, many people do not experience joy during this time of year. Even for those who find this to be “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” as the song suggests, this year, is different. Most of us won’t be able to gather with our families on Christmas Day, or attend holiday parties all month. A social calendar that used to be overfilled in Decembers past may be strikingly bare this year. In the midst of all this it can be hard to find hope and joy.

And the truth is that there *is* real struggle and suffering in the world and in our own lives, just as there has always been real suffering in the world. The Thessalonian community had reason to despair, too. They were a group of early Christians that were persecuted for their faith, and had to live quietly, doing their best to maintain the status quo while still being faithful

Christians. Yet in the midst of their persecution, Paul urged the people of Thessalonica to “rejoice always”. And in the midst of similar turmoil, John the Baptizer proclaims that he has come to testify to the light. John has come to tell the world of the one who is soon coming into the world, Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

In the midst of the suffering of the world, we receive the promise that the light of the world is coming, that soon we will celebrate as a newborn baby lies in a manger, and that tiny baby brings to us the salvation of the whole world. The light is beginning to shine with John’s proclamation this morning. “There was a man sent from God” our gospel reading begins, “whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.” There’s hope and anticipation in every word. John brings to us the promise of joy in the midst of despair, love in the midst of hatred, and hope in the midst of hopelessness. This is our promise on this Third Sunday of Advent. This is our reason for joy.

The child coming into the world brings hope for the whole world. This child will bring food to the hungry. This child will bring healing to those who are sick. This child brings shelter to the homeless, safety to victims of crime, clothing for the naked, companionship for the lonely. Christ is coming into the world, and he will bring light to all the darkest places of the world and our lives.

And as we anticipate the coming of Christ, we are called to be joyful. And so we respond to this promise from God by joyfully preparing the way of our Lord. Just like last week, we ask again, how do we prepare the way of the Lord? How do we *joyfully* prepare the way? First Thessalonians tells us to rejoice always—we give thanks to God for *all* that God has given us. God promises to provide for us daily and abundantly, and so we rejoice in God’s grace. As part of our joyful response to God’s promise, we are also invited to pray without ceasing—calling for God to act in our lives and in the lives of those around us. We intercede with sighs too deep for words and with songs of praise. We are invited to give thanks in all circumstances—to find the good in all things, and pray for God to carry us through these difficult times of life. And finally, we are invited to hold fast to what is good, and abstain from every form of evil. As we prepare for the coming of the Lord we are called to be living examples of God’s love for the world. We are called to care for and comfort one another, to feed the hungry and be God’s hands and voice in this suffering world.

In the midst of the suffering of this world, Christ’s light is beginning to shine. In the midst of hopelessness, God speaks a word of promise and hope. In the midst of hardship, we rejoice in God’s promise. In the midst of turmoil, we respond to God’s love by sharing the light with our neighbors. In the midst of despair, we are invited to joyfully prepare the way of the one who will dispel all darkness. In the midst of deep darkness comes Jesus Christ our savior, a child lying in a manger, the light and hope of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.