14 December 2025
Third Sunday of Advent A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:4-9
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

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

In the Western church, today is called *Gaudete*, or *Rejoice* Sunday! In ancient times, the first words sung at the Eucharist were taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice… The Lord is at hand* (Phil 4:4-5). Advent preparations are eased a bit; in many places the colors lighten from purple to rose. Those of us who use blue haven't quite figured out what to do about a color for today, but I have confidence that we will, one day.

In today's scriptures, we hear Isaiah sing that *the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom*. The Psalm ends with the most joyful word we know, *Alleluia*! There's a bit of a pause when James counsels us to be patient, which is not a bad thing. Later, when the altar is prepared for the Eucharist, our rejoicing will amp up when we join with Mary as she sings to her cousin Elizabeth, *tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! In God my Savior shall my heart rejoice.*

Surrounded by Santa Lucia and her lights yesterday, and the beginning of Hanukkah tomorrow, it seems like a good day for rejoicing. So it is a bit of a bump when we get to the Gospel, to see John the Baptist…again. Last Sunday, we knew what to expect from John…out there at the Jordan with his funky wardrobe and exotic cuisine, proclaiming and doing the prophet thing.

Eventually, John would run afoul of the local ruler, Herod Antipas, over calling out Herod's soap opera-worthy marriage to Herodias, his half-brother's widow. As we know, calling out people in power can be dangerous, and John now finds himself in prison.

Matthew writes, "When John heard what the Messiah was doing…" Sometimes I wonder if what Matthew really meant was, "When John heard what the Messiah was *not* doing …" After all, John had warned that the axe was lying at the root, ready to chop down unworthy trees. He had promised that the chaff would be burned with unquenchable fire.

But by all accounts, as far as John could tell, this Messiah had changed nothing. He was *supposed* to complete the costly work John had begun in the wilderness. He was *supposed* to make the world new.

But, Jesus didn't seem to be pointing the finger of judgment at anyone; there was no smoldering pile of sinners. Instead, Jesus was pronouncing forgiveness, healing the sick,

bringing Good News to the poor. Was this really what the Messiah was *supposed* to be doing? No wonder John asks, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus tells John's disciples, "go and tell John what you hear and see." "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." In other words, Jesus says: go back to John and tell him the stories of the Good News your eyes have seen, and your ears have heard. Tell him, because it is through these stories, even the quiet and seemingly insignificant ones, that the Messiah will be revealed.

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"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John's question is our question. Where, we ask, should we place our hope?

In December 2019, the late Washington Post columnist Michael Gerson (1964-2022) wrote, Advent "is the time of the Christian year dedicated to expectant longing. God, we are assured, is at mysterious work in the world. Evil and conflict are real but not ultimate. Grace and deliverance are unrealized but certain.

"None of this is to deny the high stakes of [modern life]. But the assurance at the heart of Advent is the antidote to fear. No matter how desperate the moment, we are told, time is on the side of hope.

"Such hope does not come naturally to human beings. On the evidence of our senses, despair is perfectly rational. ... Decay is knit into our flesh. By all appearances, the universe is cold, empty and indifferent."[1]

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You and I are witnesses to a seemingly endless series of calamities, some natural: fires and floods, hurricanes and tornados. Other tragedies are entirely of human origin, the inevitable result of fear being whipped up into hatred whose natural endpoint is violence.

Today we mark thirteen years since the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, yet we appear no closer to any sanity about firearms in this country. We see the normalization of racist, jingoistic, antisemitic, misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic rhetoric in the public square. Our own government criminalizes people for being poor or unhoused. Not to mention war and suffering civilians in Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza. These are just some of the headlines; the entire list is unbearable.

Why, we cry out, doesn't God intervene? Even once in a while? Why hasn't God gotten off God's *tuches* and done something? Is God the One? Or are we to wait for another?

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[1] Michael Gerson, "Advent teaches us that hope is not a cruel joke," *Washington Post*, December 5, 2019.

I've spent a lot of time thinking and talking about being in the midst of tragedy – not just as individuals, but also as families and communities. I learned early on that, when you wear a clergy collar, people expect you to have THE answer. If only that were true!

Some time ago, I came across a poem written in 1789 by William Blake called *On another's sorrow*. It describes the challenging but essential nature of empathy, the way in which we relate to others who are in pain. Empathy is tricky because it is *not* sympathy – feeling sorry for, or having pity on, someone. Empathy is about having compassion for others. Empathy is being present to others, and their pain. Empathy leads to a deeper understanding of what it means to be fully human.

Before the poem, a couple of things about William Blake. Blake (1757-1827) was a British painter, printmaker, and poet. I think most of us know some of Blake's writing, for example, "and did those feet in ancient time." This, of course, when set to music by Charles Hubert Hastings Parry, became the hymn "Jerusalem." Who doesn't recall singing about "dark Satanic Mills," or hearing "bring me my chariot of fire!" while jogging in slow motion on a beach?

Blake had a profound reverence for Holy Scripture, but was completely hostile to the Church of England. Not a love-hate sort of relationship; it was pretty much a hate-hate relationship. His understanding of God and humanity was deeply at odds with most of the religious-minded folk of his day.

Traditional thinking held that God was, well, God. We, on the other hand, were all wretched and miserable from birth. And our life-long task was to try to demonstrate to God that we were really, really, REALLY trying to get it right. Of course, that was more than 200 years ago. Thank goodness things have changed…!?

Quite out of step with his time, Blake believed, passionately, in a God who possessed empathy. He believed this precisely because of the Incarnation. That, in Jesus Christ, God had set aside royal purple to be birthed in a feeding trough and, later, to suffer one of the most agonizing deaths imaginable. The Incarnation is the great mystery for which Advent helps us to prepare.

You often hear me talk about Jesus embracing, enfolding, and redeeming every harm that can ever befall us. This is because we believe in an Incarnate God, a God of empathy, a God who knows and lives our sorrows.

Blake's poem is long, and you will find the whole text in your service bulletin, so you can take it home with you, but I ask you to listen now. It begins…

> Can I see another's woe,
> And not be in sorrow too?
> Can I see another's grief,
> And not seek for kind relief?
>
> Can I see a falling tear,
> And not feel my sorrow's share?

Blake goes on to compare the compassion of God to that of earthly parents, much in the style of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:11). "If you … know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask!" At length, he concludes:

> He doth give his joy to all:
> He becomes an infant small,
> He becomes a man of woe,
> He doth feel the sorrow too.
>
> Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
> And thy Maker is not by:
> Think not thou canst weep a tear,
> And thy Maker is not near.
>
> O He gives to us his joy,
> That our grief He may destroy:
> Till our grief is fled and gone
> He doth sit by us and moan.

Blake's poem illustrates precisely why we hear John's question this morning, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" The question arises out of our loss, our pain, our grief – perhaps even our rage at others for betraying us. Perhaps even our rage at God for letting us down.

In this cold, dark and lonely place – not unlike the Baptist's prison cell – we can, if we listen, hear what the Messiah has been doing. Because, as disappointed as we can be with a God who seems to be spectacularly underperforming, the Good News today is that "hope is not a cruel joke…Because Advent is a declaration of war upon fear."[2]

And so, dear Ones in Christ, as you continue your Advent journey, look for seeds and sparks of hope, and then tell the stories of the Good News you have seen and heard. Stories of how you seek to form your own life by following Christ's example of empathy. Stories of learning to sit by those society casts out. Because it is those stories that will reveal the Messiah who is coming – not for the strong and the proud but for the weak, the vulnerable and the brokenhearted. In the Incarnation, God in Jesus came to us, and

gives to us his joy,
That our grief He may destroy:
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice! Amen.

[2] Gerson.