

Sermon for Advent III

For the recorded service of Christ Church Christiana Hundred, Wilmington
And the livestream service of St. Martha's Episcopal Church, Bethany Beach
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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

"Who are you? And what do you say about yourself?" These are questions that the priests and Levites asked John when they found him baptizing people in the river Jordan. They'd been sent from the authorities in Jerusalem to check his credentials, to discover if he was another one of those crocks, pretending to be somebody, and misleading the innocent crowds. Or if, maybe, he really was somebody.

"Who are you?" They ask. And John says, well, I'm not the Messiah, if that's what you were thinking. And I'm not Elijah, returned from heaven, and I'm not the prophet.

Well who are you?? "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" What does that have to do with baptism, if you aren't the Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet?

They did not understand how John interpreted the prophecy from Isaiah, found in Chapter 40, when Isaiah says, "A new voice cries, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain, And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together." They didn't understand.

But John did.

John understood his purpose was preparation. Preparation for the revealing of the glory of the Lord. Who was John? He was the one to prepare the way for Jesus, calling the people to repent of the sins that made their lives crooked and crazy, uneven and uncertain, even tumultuous. John was the one to prepare, so that when Jesus was revealed, the people would receive the glory of eternal life with God.

The message of John the Baptist is for those who do not realize that the Messiah, the Savior is standing among them, one whom they do not know. Yet. The purpose of John the Baptist is to be a bold witness that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world — Jesus who removes all that separates us from the love of God, the overwhelming, never-ending grace and mercy that spares nothing, withholds nothing, but gives everything to draw all people into salvation — into an eternal life that is blessed and glorious. Glorious!

Now, some who are listening today may feel they need the witness of John and a baptism to wash away the uneven places that cast shadows and obscure the way to the kind of life worth living. And John's bold witness speaks in every age, calling us to repentance in all humility. Some of us need to hear that today. And the church needs to be bold Baptists, enthusiastically calling attention, like John did, that Jesus is among us, waiting to save and heal and bless and draw everyone into a glorious life.

But today, my message for the church is less John and more Paul. As Paul wrote to the church in Thessaloniki, his earliest letter saved and included in the New Testament, I want to speak to you who have heard and received and believed that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. That he has already redeemed you, saved you from the bondage of sin and death and brought you into everlasting life so that you have no need to fear what is to come.

My message today is not John's word of preparation – REPENT. My message today is Paul's word of practice — REJOICE. Those who have received Jesus as Savior are called to rejoice always, because we have received a glorious life and will never be separated from God's never-ending, overwhelming love. God's salvation is a gift worthy of our rejoicing, isn't it? Rejoice always, that's Paul's word to the church he founded in Thessaloniki, and he repeats that message in his epistle to the community in Philippi, saying "Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I will say, rejoice." Though Paul is in prison, the letter he writes to the church in Philippi is full of radiant joy and happiness in Christ. Again in his letter to the church in Rome, those Christians whom Paul has not met, he commends a joyful witness when Paul writes, "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, and practice hospitality."

From his very first epistle to his last, Paul is calling for a witness of joy among those who have accepted Jesus as Savior, who have received his forgiveness and the power of the Spirit to live godly lives. The Christian witness is of joy not scorn, of bold joy not bald condemnation. Hear First Thessalonians again. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." It's like Paul is the parent, driving the kids to a play date at a friend's house (once we do those again) or on the way to summer camp or college, delivering the final reminder of the manners we are to have, the way we represent the family when we are with others. Instead of "play nicely, take turns, remember to say please and thank you" Paul asks our witness to be joyful, prayerful, and grateful.

If you need John's word today, take it. **Repent** and allow God's grace to fill you with glory as you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior. But I need Paul's word today; I think the whole church, the whole world needs Paul's word today. **REJOICE!** If he could rejoice in prison it was because he knew the prison was only temporary, but the salvation is forever. If Paul can rejoice in prison then I can rejoice in my life, whatever forms the prison might take. Tap into that joy that Christ Jesus is in you and has given you eternal life and do your happy dance.

PRAY without ceasing; God is always more ready to hear than we are to pray. The more I speak and listen with God through the day's circumstances, the more confidence and clarity I have as I live this life and wait for the life to come. Prayer reminds me who I am, reassures me and connects me in the Spirit's power.

GIVE THANKS in all circumstances. Yes, even in the midst of a prison sentence with an unknown outcome, Paul gave thanks to God for that never ending, overwhelming grace and mercy and peace that was freedom for him, even in the midst of persecution and bondage. So I can give thanks in all circumstances today. Giving thanks connects us in bonds of appreciation and reassurance, so that we have confidence that we are valued and valuable, remembered and blessed, not only by God, but by one another.

Who are you? The skeptics will ask, testing to see if we are crocks, out to manipulate the innocent. And we will respond, "**we are the people of joy; we are the people of delight and gratitude and confidence in the grace of God's savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is in our midst, and we are called by his name.**"

What is our purpose? To witness to Christ as Lord of life by rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances. We are called to serve as bold witnesses to Christ in a life characterized by delight, by gratitude, by confidence through prayer. Take Paul's word for this week. Rejoice! Rejoice every day! Rejoice in the Lord always, give thanks, and call upon him; for the Lord is good, God's mercy is everlasting, and his salvation is in you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.