

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent 2014 3B
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In case you were wondering, we didn't run out of blue candles. Our Advent candle is pink today for a reason. It is the third Sunday of Advent, sometimes called 'Rose Sunday,' but traditionally known as "*Gaudete* Sunday," '*gaudete* being a Latin word that means 'rejoice,' because the proper introit for the day begins with that word.

Our ancestors, in their wisdom, decided a break was needed from the fasting and foreboding of Advent (they hadn't anticipated the holiday party season, I guess) and decided to symbolize the lightening up of the readings this Sunday with a lightening up of the color as well.

We Anglicans have another name for this Sunday, which is "Stirrup Sunday," because of the Collect we all said earlier that begins, "Stir up our hearts, O God."

The theme of rejoicing continues in the readings. We have Isaiah's prophecy of the coming reign of God with all manner of good things – the year of the Lord's favor, the restoration of all things, good news, liberation, and justice, and Paul's admonition in the letter to the Thessalonians to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks to God in all circumstances.

Two thousand years ago, more or less, the Jewish people of Palestine were abuzz with anticipation of the fulfillment of that prophecy. God had promised to restore the fortunes of Zion, and it was about time, you might think, what with the occupation of the Middle East by the pitiless Roman conquerors, the unbearable burdens of taxation, and the reduction of Jewish citizens to Roman slaves and peons. As often happens when people suffer long-lasting oppression, there was millennial fever. The Jews were looking high and low for the one God had promised, who would be anointed by God to set things right. Everybody was watching, waiting: looking for “the one,” waiting for “the time.”

In scripture, we find two parallel stories. The one we heard in today’s gospel recounts how the people of Jerusalem, hearing rumors about John the Baptizer, sent priests and Levites from the Temple out into the wilderness to ask John if he was “the one,” if now was “the time.” And he says, ‘No.’ He is so far from being ‘the one’ he doesn’t deserve to take off his shoes for him. But he says that ‘the time’ is so near you can almost taste it; so near that the time to get ready is already here and almost gone.

In a parallel story, not one of our readings today, John the Baptist, languishing in prison, and hearing rumors about Jesus of Nazareth, sends

some of his followers to as Jesus if he is ‘the one,’ if now is ‘the time. And the Jewish leaders come out to see Jesus for the same reason.

Jesus doesn’t give as straightforward an answer as John does. A simple “I am” would have cleared up a lot of things, but instead Jesus says, “Go tell John what you see: The blind are seeing, the lame are leaping up,” in short, the ancient prophecy of the year of the Lord’s favor is being fulfilled.

I don’t think Jesus was being cagey – he’s trying to get people to realize that they hadn’t really understood what God was promising. A simple “yes” would have led people down the path of their own expectations: “OK Jesus, if you’re ‘the one,’ when do we start organizing the resistance?” Do we use guerilla tactics? IEDs? Enhanced interrogation techniques? Or do we form a big army out here in the desert and march on the capitol? Where do I sign up?”

We so frequently misunderstand God’s purposes and God’s promises. We conflate God’s desires with our own, We so long for power, for vindication, for rough justice, for triumph, that we assume that God wants the same thing for us, even though we know that power and justice and vindication and triumph are solely the property of God.

So Jesus seeks to remind the world that what God has promised is not triumph but restoration, and God has not sent a hero, but a healer. Conquest, after all, only changes an enemy into a defeated enemy. The reign of God, on the other hand, requires transforming enemies into friends.

So what are you waiting for? When God's promise is fulfilled, and your fortunes restored, do you expect to be avenged? Justified? Vindicated? What would you go out into the desert to see? A rescuer? Someone who will fix the problems in your life? Break your addictions? Get you to the top of your career? Get your family to start respecting you? Take off those extra pounds? When you hear on the news about the latest self-help guru who is inspiring millions, what would get you to buy the book? To sign up for the seminar? What would get you to go to the rally? Walk for the campaign? Write a check?

What are you hoping for? Waiting for? Longing for?

We are not so far from our Palestinian ancestors in our hope that someone will arise who can set things right, lead us to a new and better place; in our hope that the world may someday be transformed.

What we are short on, these days, are people who will, like John the Baptizer, say, "No. I am not the one."

What we have no shortage of, though, is people who have the power, if they will use it, to say with Jesus, “God is not offering rescue or conquest. God is offering love. And as a sign of the fulfillment of God’s promise, I will love you. And in loving you, we both may be changed –from enemies to friends, from strangers to family, from sufferers to rejoicers.

The army of people who have that power is us, and whatever we may be waiting for, what God is waiting for, right now, is for us to take up the power of love and use it. Amen.