

Good morning!

The third Sunday in Advent has some different names in church parlance:

1. Stir up Sunday, from the beginning words of the collect today, in which we pray to God to “stir up your power, O Lord” – certainly one of those times when we should be careful what we ask for!
2. Rose Sunday – for the color of the third candle that some churches and families use in their Advent wreathes ... which comes from
3. Gaudete (pronounced “*gow-DET-eh*”) Sunday, which is ecclesiastical Latin for “Joy.” Our readings for today talk about joy – in Isaiah, we are promised good news, liberty, comfort, the oil of gladness, salvation, righteousness, and praise. Psalm 126 echoes rings shouts of joy and songs of joy. Paul, through his letter to the Thessalonians, urges us to “rejoice always.”

On the third Sunday in Advent, we are reminded of the joy that’s coming – the Messiah. Christ. God incarnate. Normally, in two short weeks, we would gather to sing “Joy to the world,” and other such carols and hymns that express our joy at the celebration and reminder of Christ’s birth. Normally.

Normally, we Christians hear messages that run counter to the cultural messages of the world. In church, we’d hear: “Slow Down” ... “Wait” ... “Prepare” ... “Quiet.” In the world, we’d hear: “Hurry” “Hustle and bustle” “parties” “meetings” Christmas music piped through the speakers of every space we move in ... “only __ shopping days left until Christmas!” (well, we’re still hearing THAT one, huh?)

Normally, as Christians, we’d be working to experience Advent over here ... and the world would be experiencing the lead-up to Christmas in a very different way over here. Something’s happened, though. We’re not living in “normal” times. This year, now, the world and the church are experiencing a significant overlap. We’re ALL waiting. Waiting: for the test results; for a loved one to return home; for a vaccine; for the world to “re-open;” for the chaos to settle. We stand in a pretty significant time. And space.

This space can feel pretty crowded. At my job, my space is crowded with worship planning, bulletins, almost-end-of-year financial stuff. At my home, my son, daughter, granddaughter, four dogs, two cats, and various stages of laundry are vying for physical space. And our mental spaces are full of anxiety about our jobs, our health, our family and friends, availability of food and toilet paper, the state of the world, and how we’re going to make it through another week of online learning. O.k., I minimized. This space is REALLY crowded. It feels a little like I’m experiencing death by a thousand cuts, and I really want it to stop. I want to tell Isaiah, and the psalmist, and St. Paul to take a hike, because there’s no space for joy here.

And then, along comes the Holy Hippie. John, the man sent from God. John says, “you better make some room, because the Lord’s coming.” Well heck. “Fine” I say to myself. “How do I do THAT?” And Isaiah and the psalmist and St. Paul are all waving at me saying, “here, here, like this!” Isaiah says, “Build up. Repair. Love justice. Hate wrongdoing. Exult in our God.” The Psalmist says, “Laugh. Sing. Praise the Lord.” St. Paul says, “Pray. Give thanks. Ask questions. Abstain from evil.” That’s a lot of “doing”!

And John? In response to being peppered by bureaucratic questions, he offers a void. He offers what he is NOT. He creates space to testify to the Light.

Every few generations, someone (like Mozart, Debussy, Miles Davis) says something along the lines of “music is the space between the notes.” To quote Miles Davis directly, “it’s not the notes you play, it’s the notes you don’t play.” I know I can find some time in my day to listen for those spaces in a piece of music; maybe you can too. And I think when I’m better at that, I can concentrate on noticing those spaces in my day when I can just be still and know that God is God. And then I can practice asking God to create more space. For more joy.

In the Muppet version of *A Christmas Carol*, Michael Caine gives a riveting performance as Ebenezer Scrooge. With the ghost of Christmas past, he is nostalgic and full of regrets. With the ghost of Christmas yet to come, he is anxious and full of fear. It is only with the ghost of Christmas present that Scrooge smiles, laughs, dances, sings, and asks questions. It is in the present he learns what is needed to bind up the broken-hearted, and to bring good news to the oppressed. It is the space in his heart that allows him to be full of joy.

During Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and every time we partake in Holy Communion, we are celebrating what was, and waiting for what is to come. We do it NOW. In this time. In this space. Now, more than ever, we have a holy opportunity to use our time and space to ask God to fill us with joy. So we can demonstrate joy to a world that so desperately needs it.

Let us pray:

O God, our times are in your hand ... ALL time is in your hand. Help us to let go of our nostalgia and regret, our anxiety and fear, so there is space for your Son and for the joy that is your love; that we can truly be still, and know that you are God.

Amen.