

Third Sunday in Advent • December 17, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Isaiah 61:1-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Gaudete”

“Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!” “Ring in joy.” “Hark the glad sound!” “Joy to the world.” “Rejoice, rejoice, believers.” I did a quick check of our *Lutheran Service Book* hymnal and found that no fewer than 56 hymns include the word “rejoice.” The word “joy?” 167. If you’ve been listening to the songs of the season, it’d seem like you’re supposed to be rejoicing. But what if you don’t feel like rejoicing?

This weekend, Christians around the world will remember the Third Sunday in Advent as “Gaudete Sunday.” *Gaudete* is the Latin translation of the first word of our reading the reading from 1 Thessalonians 5. The English version would be something like, “All y’all rejoice!” Gaudete Sunday is a day about joyous anticipation.

Advent is meant to be kind of like Lent, a season of preparation before a big time of celebration in our life together as Christians. We wait and watch together for the dawning of the light that Jesus brings into the world. The candles grow brighter on the Advent wreath, even as the days of the year grow darker. The winter solstice, the day with the shortest period of daylight and the longest night of the year, will arrive on December 21, Thursday of the week ahead. This time of Advent, and especially Gaudete Sunday, points God’s people to a reason for rejoicing even when what’s going on in your world might leave you doubting if that’s even an option anymore.

Even as friends, coworkers, and family members are ramping up holiday celebrations in this week or so before Christmas Day, you might be facing the effects of grief, loss, or depression. It might seem like the rest of the world is passing you by or leaving you behind – even the church. Seeing all the decorations, hearing all the singing and talking about hope, you might feel like you have to put on a happy face for the sake of those around you. You don’t. Grief, loss, and depression are real, human conditions. People experience them every day. God’s people experience them, too.

We feel grief and loss because of the brokenness of our world. That brokenness brings death. It shatters relationships. And it is brokenness for which each one of us shares responsibility because of the sin and selfishness in our hearts. I don’t know a single human being that hasn’t been touched by grief or loss, but this time of the year can be especially hard for some.

Depression is something different. It is *not* weakness of faith. It is *not* weakness of character. Depression is an ailment that should not be ignored or pushed aside, but rather treated with the aid of medical professionals in therapeutic care. Like grief and loss, it, too, can sting more deeply in this season.

For the past few years, our congregation has offered a service centered around the theme “When Christmas Hurts,” timed to take place on or near the longest night of the year. With the pain grief, loss, or depression bring, this holy season can feel like a burden instead of a blessing. We acknowledge that. Even if we don’t often speak directly about grief, loss, and depression in sermons or have Bible studies on them, we should never pretend that they don’t exist or aren’t topics we should bring up with our family in Christ. Because our coming King doesn’t want anyone passed by or left behind.

Among the people of God who have been redeemed by Jesus, grief, loss, and depression should never be stigmas, marks of disgrace and shame, especially in this time of Advent. Those who have gone before us in the faith have experienced these states, including people you can read about in the Bible. Go back and read the psalms, and you’ll see real, human struggles with grief and loss being earnestly brought before God. And based off what we know about Martin Luther from his own writings and the records of his contemporaries, it’s highly likely that he struggled with severe depression throughout his life. From Luther’s writings we also know that the gift of music – particularly the music of hymns and psalms – served to support and encourage him through times of depression and trial.¹ In the face of grief, loss, or depression, let’s sing the songs of Advent without shame.

In our Sunday morning Advent services, we’ve been singing a setting of the First Servant Song from the book of the prophet Isaiah. The first part of today’s reading from Isaiah 61 is known as the Fifth Servant Song. All the “servant songs” in Isaiah point to the One that God would send as the promised deliverer of His people: Jesus. Here in Isaiah 61, we hear what Jesus comes to do: he brings good news to the poor. The “poor” are all those who are distressed or in trouble for any reason, including grief over their own sins.

Jesus will bind up the brokenhearted. He will declare liberty for the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. He will be the deliverer that God's people need, the deliverer of a world that is bound in brokenness. Take another look (or listen) to one of the best-known hymns of Advent, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It's all about crying out for God to bring His promised deliverance from a really bad, broken world!

You have a deliverer, even in the face of grief, loss, or depression. That is the hope that comes from outside of ourselves, hope that comes from God's promised deliverer. It's the hope that you can have looking to Jesus' cross and the waters of Baptism as objective, external signs of God's love for you. Look to the cross and see how God in Christ declares liberty for the captives and the opening of the prison for those who are bound by rescuing you from His wrath and the burden of your sin. Look to the font and see how God in Christ binds up the brokenhearted and brings good news to the poor by delivering you into His kingdom. God's love for you in Christ is the reason why you are not helpless, why you are not hopeless.

Gaudete. "All y'all rejoice!" You have a deliverer, someone outside yourself who comes to see you through the brokenness of this world. That's what you and I can rejoice on this Third Sunday in Advent. It's why the Apostle Paul can encourage us to "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:16-18) Note that it's not "give thanks *because of* all circumstances." You don't have to celebrate the brokenness of the world! Rather, we rejoice, celebrate, and give thanks because God is faithful to His promises and sends light into our darkness.

As the people of Christ in the Church, we live together as a community of care and compassion, sharing the hope that we have in the One who comes to deliver us. We're called to do so especially for our brother or sister in faith who could use some care and compassion. No one should have to pretend that they're "all good," especially in the Church. We acknowledge that we are broken people in a broken world who need hope that comes from outside of ourselves. That's why we're here! Support and encourage each other, praying for one another and doing good to each other. As a community in Christ, give what is needed in the proper time. Comfort those who mourn, especially in this season of Advent.

In these darkest hours of the darkest days of the year, we sing! We give voice to the biblical truth that we have a deliverer who binds up the brokenhearted, who declares liberty for the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. We have a Savior who is good news all those who are distressed or in trouble for any reason. We have confidence in Christ, our coming King.

Listen to – and sing! – the songs of Advent. You have hope that comes from outside of yourself. *Gaudete.* "All y'all rejoice!"

Amen.

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/martin-luthers-shelter-amid-flood-of-depression/>