A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

The Third Sunday of Advent

*“Shout Gaudete”*

Luke 3

December 16, 2018

The third Sunday of Advent is Christmas Party Sunday in the liturgical Advent season. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, Advent traditionally was not a season of mirth and celebration but a time of repentance and spiritual preparation. The fun was saved until Christmas actually began. Advent was more like Lent. The color is purple like at Lent. Readings are from the prophets, sharply rebuking the people for sins, injustices, and warning about judgment to come. With Advent/Christmas and Lent/ Easter, the Christian worship year followed the rhythm: preparation, celebration. Fasting, feasting. Repentance, salvation. Darkness, light. Death, resurrection. Hope, fulfillment. Advent was a season of preparation for the coming of the Lord. That meant repentance, praying for cleansing, examining our lives for wisdom on the ways we had fallen short and needed to be saved. Advent was a season to remember just how serious our need for salvation really is; how good is the good news of God’s coming.

Along the way Christian worshippers began to light a candle marking the Sundays of Advent. Naturally, they were purple candles, the color of repentance. Except for one candle, the third Sunday was pink. Even today, Christians light a pink candle on the third Sunday of Advent because this is a Sunday unlike the others in the season. Flanked by purple, the color of repentance, pink is lighthearted, a color of joy. This Sunday is called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for “rejoice.” The name and the spirit are from Philippians 4: Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice, rejoice in the Lord always.

One Sunday out of the four, we light a lighter shade of candle. It’s not quite white. It’s not quite Christmas yet, but it’s a sign we’re getting closer. With joy born of anticipation, we celebrate a little ahead of time what is to come, the coming of Christ and the feast of Christmas.

In other words, this is the Christmas party of the Advent season. Rejoice, the Apostle exhorts. Sing aloud the prophet Zephaniah proclaims. Rejoice and exult with all your heart. Never needing to be told twice to have a party, we do. We lift our voices in Philippian song. We celebrate the coming of the Messiah. It’s a party a little ahead of time.

At this party everyone’s having a grand time. Everyone’s dressed in their finest party clothes and shined up shoes. Joyful music wafts through the rooms, the strings and trumpets, the lilting voices of happy songs of hope, and love. The food is abundant, there’s enough for everyone to have their fill and it’s delicious, spread out, fun foods on toothpicks you shouldn’t normally eat, but tonight, you have a second helping saying, “Oh I shoudn’t . . .but I will.” You are one with the universe. You’re a Who in Whoville. You’re living a wonderful life in Bedford Falls. Your awful Christmas sweater is wonderful. It blinks, doesn’t it? Maybe it even plays a tune. Drinks are festive. Conversation flows easily even for introverts on this night. Your stories are brilliant. Your punchlines are killing ‘em. Satisfied merriment fills the place. It’s a party and it’s a good one. “Gaudete!” someone shouts out (this is a DaySpring party you know and someone’s always gotta show off they know Latin.) Gaudete! Everyone shouts in return. Gaudete indeed. We rejoice.

Then the door opens wide. Cold gusts from the bleak midwinter carve up the room. Guess who just arrived? Into our pre-Christmas, Advent breaking, liturgically sanctioned Gaudete Sunday Party singing Zephaniah and Philippian songs comes John, the one they call the Baptizer, old Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s boy. Everyone shouts, “John!” and they pat him on the back, glad to see an old friend.

The last time we saw him he was just a baby. That was a while ago. But we remember what he was like. There was something different about him then. Definitely different. The only way to describe it was that John was joyful. This is the boy who leapt in his mother’s womb for joy when she was near Mary. It made his mother Elizabeth laugh with delight.

That was a while ago and John, well, it dawns on us one by one, John looks different now. Like he’s been on a lonely journey of hunger and thirst for the elusive meaning in life, or . . . something. Who knows exactly, but something’s different. It’s the look in his eyes. There’s a penetrating gaze in his eyes that’s one part fear and another part otherworldly confidence. It’s like he knows something. What he doesn’t know is how to dress for a party. Come on John, were you raised in a barn? Camel hair shirt, worn out sandals. Get this man some clothes. Give him a plate of food. “I have food you know nothing about,” John says. At least give him a bath. “I do the bathing around here, remember.” John replies.

Which, to be honest, are really weird things to say. No one knows quite what to make of it, but there’s something about him that at first looks off, but then looks just right. It’s like John has discovered a secret, some truth that the rest of us thought was there but didn’t know how to access. It looks like he’s found something in himself or in the universe.

John turns to leave as abruptly as he arrived. The party-goers glad to see him a moment ago are now intrigued, drawn, almost called, after the unspoken uncertainty of, “What do we do?” to follow. They follow him right out the door and begin a journey they never forget. This is the story of that journey.

They follow him down the walk and through the neighborhood streets, down the road, past brightly lit houses with their window displays and blow up decorations and people who look really happy through their front windows. But you know, not everything is always as it seems. They follow him across town. This whole party of people, not knowing where they’re going, except past places they don’t go too often, the wildernesses of human existence. They follow him past the payday loan store where people are lined up to get themselves further in chains so they can keep the electricity on for Christmas. A few of them in the party wonder, ‘What do we do about that?” They walk through the part of town where the sidewalk is all busted up and the streetlights don’t work. It feels like they’re being watched. If John noticed, he didn’t slow down, but he doesn’t hurry either. They walk past the police station where the strung out and the hung out are collected for the night.

They walk past the donation line for food and the line for beds. Some of them ask, “What can we do about that?” They walk past the hospitals and the nursing homes.

It’s the strangest unlicensed Christmas parade you’ve ever imagined. Then they walk straight out of town and don’t slow down. Not too fast for anyone though. It seems like the crowd is moving at just the pace everyone needs. No one knows where they’re going.

But that’s not new. Most of the folks in this crowd haven’t known where they were going for a long time and now they have time to think about uncomfortable reality in the quiet of the shuffling group and the cloudless night under the bright stars. Most of them are doing well to get through the end of each day, going along, having long since lost a sense of purpose in life. A lot of them are just happy if there isn’t too much month left at the end of the money. Some of them have some stuff in their lives you don’t talk about at dinner parties and hardly even in prayers. It’s a mixed bunch. Take away the fabulous blinking Christmas sweaters and it’s people, just people, just regular people living their lives in all the vagaries that define the existential boredom or confusion that most people feel. “What do I do now?” they don’t want to ask.

They don’t know where they’re going as they follow John, but it feels important now, like they’re going somewhere true and somewhere true is even better than the masquerades. John doesn’t say a word. He keeps walking. If they stopped following you get the idea he would keep on walking without them. Compelled, they keep going.

They walk right on out of the city, past a cemetery, where some of them go sometimes to lay a flower for a loved one. Everyone walks quietly past that sacred space. They walk out along the river, the one with trash swirling in the eddies, a slow moving soup of fertilizers and chemicals that make the water undrinkable and fish inedible. You wouldn’t even baptize in that would you. “What can we do about that?” They walk past fields of farmers who might have to sell their heritage to corporate conglomerates and past small towns where there aren’t enough jobs to make a living or a life. They walk alongside highways full of cars stuffed with people hurrying to get from one place to the next without knowing why. They walk past fulfillment centers where robots stuff things we don’t need into boxes and stack them to be loaded on trucks.

They keep on walking right on to the national border. On one side is a golf course, green, lush. On the other is a cardboard city with mommas and babies and it’s cold. And where do those people go from here? But what can we do? Good people somberly wonder.

They keep walking. They walk around the world. They walk past refugee camps and melting glaciers. They walk past soldier boys and girls posted uncomfortably near others in different uniforms they’re told they’re supposed to hate and destroy if needed, but they don’t feel hate and don’t want to fight. The look in their eyes says they just want to go home. John walks on. They walk past villages where people survive in utter simplicity from meal to meal and past opulent mansions where the rich live in debilitating fear of the market plummeting. They walk past their nightmares and their dreams, and aren’t sure after a while which was which.

They walk the whole world, too many places to name or remember all at once. Then John stops. They all stop. Their caravan comes to a bridge over a small river, yet strangely they can’t see the other end of the bridge. It’s hidden in some mysterious way, by a cloud, by a mist, by a mystery. Like a bridge troll John stops the crowd. You shall not pass on from here. You’re not ready. They ask, “Then what shall we do? We can’t just go back to life as it was after all of this.” John’s heard that question before. It’s the question he was asked at the Jordan River a long time ago. What should we do? He was asked by people either shaken up by his teaching or wanting to join him in his life. What do we do John, about all of this that now fills our consciousness, all the pain, all the suffering we’ve seen? What should we do about our own lives? We see those more clearly now too. We’re ready to change. We’re ready to follow. What should we do? Should we be a desert dweller like you, dress like you, eat like you? Is that what you want? What should we do? He gives the same answer he gave them back then.

You should go home, he says. Go home to your families, your neighbors, your neighborhoods, your vocations, your friends and to the people you do life with. You should go home to them. To the people you work for and those who work for you. Stop fleeing from the nitty-gritty of life. God is there. That’s where God already is and where life with God begins and where the healing of the world begins too. Instead of waiting for a day far away, inhabit your life as truthfully, as fully, as deeply, and as generously as you can right now. What should you do? Be kind, be just, walk humbly with God. The holy ground you’re looking for is there right under your feet.

Go home. First, go home.

You’re living as if the real meaning of your faith is beyond you, when it’s right here all along in you. It’s in you, not in that overblown mushy gnostic way of spiritual individuality. No, quite the opposite. The truth that is right in your path is right in the place where you learn to know and confess the truth about yourself. That’s no small grace I’m offering to you, the grace of truth-telling. It’s the only real way to confession, repentance, preparation, and to true freedom and joy.

That’s the key I’m trying to tell you. We’re all connected in a luminous web. What happens in one person affects the other. We’re all tied in this world together. This is both beautiful and harrowing. Blessing and cursing flow from one to another through all that we say and do. So go home.

But are you the one? They started to ask. No, he said, I am not the one we’ve been waiting for. But he’s coming. He’s coming soon. I’m not worthy to untie his sandals. He’s coming soon with judgment. Judgment is coming. But judgment doesn’t mean condemnation. Judgment is knowing something as it truly is. Learning to see yourself as you truly are is good news. Good news like this is the path to joy because it’s the slender opening grace needs to redeem you. What I’m telling you is that you’re now a people whose vision is for the good of the world and whose work is with the people closest to you. Humility, justice, compassion, generosity. Start with the people closest to you and you’ll be on the way. (Thanks to Debie Thomas for her keen insight on this point. https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2030-what-then-should-we-do)

The party crowd was pierced to the heart, but not in the way you think. You’d think they’d be discouraged about all this, having left their party for this kind of news, but they weren’t discouraged. Their hearts were full. Because, finally, this was what they had hungered for, to hear someone speak to them this way without guile, without pulling any punches. They drank it up soberly and eagerly.

They see the world as it is now: heartbreaking and holy. They see now that suffering is a part of the human experience, so we must relieve one another’s suffering as we’re able. This is holy, too, John says. And the one who is coming, he knows this fully. He will take all our suffering upon himself. He will wear it like a crown. He will wear it like a robe. He will take it into his heart and his heart will break. It will break, I tell you. But this is just the beginnings. You’ve been paying attention to the lessons church life has taught you, right?

You know where there is deepest darkness to look for the light. Where there is preparation, celebration is soon to come. Fasting leads to feasting. Repentance makes way for salvation. From death comes resurrection. Where there is a tomb, there is new life. Where there is an ending, there is new creation.

What do we do about our party, now, they wonder. It seems wrong to sing with joy with so much pain in the world. What do we do, John? Do we silence our parties?

No, John says. The world needs rejoicing, now more than ever, but make it real. Make them better. Rejoice always, rejoice anyways. Go home, and sing, and shout Gaudete. Shout it from the rooftops, shout it from the mountaintops, whisper it in the hospitals and the graveyards, say it with conviction in the shelters and the prisons and every place of darkness that needs a little flickering light. Those who do not weep do not see the world as it is; those who do not rejoice, do not see the world as it is. Weep and sing. Repent and believe.

Fling wide the doors and invite everyone to sing the songs of hope, even though you’re singing just a little ahead of time.

Rejoice in every way you can, whenever you can, as fully as you can. The good news is coming. The good news is here. Look, here he comes, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

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