

Sermon draft

Text: John 1:6–8, 19–28

Sermon: “Rejoice Always”

Nostalgia, resignation, and fear. That pretty much sums up how many people view their lives. How often do we hear people longing for “the good old days” or lament that “they don’t make things the way they used to.” When it comes to the present, there’s often a general feeling of resignation. As we look at the world around us and our own situation, many generally respond with the well-worn and fatalistic cliché “it is what it is.” And most of don’t want even to think about the future. Who knows what’s going to happen in the Middle East? Will Iran acquire nuclear weapons? And what will North Korea do with its nuclear arsenal? What kind of world will our children face? How will our grandchildren be able to survive in the midst of frightening moral decay?

On this Third Sunday in Advent, known for its emphasis on rejoicing, our sermon text for this morning tells us of the work and witness of John the Baptist. In the midst of a people who longed for the glory of their past under rulers like David and Solomon, who resented their present situation of being subdued and ruled by the Romans, and who had grave concerns about their future if things didn't change, John brings God's message of greater things to come.

His message, as one sent from God, was a message of hope and a promise of greater things to come in the coming Savior, which would be cause for great rejoicing.

One might think that God would somehow order the politics or the economics of Israel to provide health, wealth, and happiness. If that were the case, perhaps God would send a Savior to run for public office.

But “a car in every driveway and a chicken in every pot,” as one politician once quipped, is not going to resolve our most basic need: reconciliation with God.

From the fall into sin by the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, our relationship with God has been broken. Instead of bearing the holy image of God, our human nature is sinful, and our heart brings forth sin and corruption. Jesus said, ***“what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander”*** (Matthew 15:18–19).

One does not have to look far to see how this has had a growing impact on the apparent downward spiral of things in our world. Suffice it to say that a quick perusal of the local newspaper will confirm the dreadful effect of sin in our world.

Even when our world and our society want to be at their best, even in this current season when we hear so much talk about peace and goodwill, in reality the consequences of sin in the lives of people and nations are evident everywhere.

Rather than spending time speaking of sin in past and current affairs, let's talk about sin in our lives. It may be a little uncomfortable. Its effects may be manifested in ill health, loneliness, broken relationships, suffering, or some kind of personal loss. We all experience these things. They may be the result of our own sin or the sin of others or simply the result of life in a sinful and dying world. And on the basis of this broken relationship with God, whether we look at the past, present, or future, there isn't much for which to rejoice. It was that way two thousand years ago, and it's true also today. Is that all there is?

Why doesn't God do something about this? He has!

Our sermon text begins with the words, "***There was a man sent from God, whose name was John***" (v 6). With those words, it would certainly seem that God has done something.

In the New Testament, we can read about a number of "sent" individuals. The angel Gabriel was sent to Mary to announce that she would give birth to Jesus (Luke 1:19, 26); Jesus sent out the twelve disciples to announce that the kingdom of God was near (Matthew 10:5–7); Paul tells us that he was sent to preach the Gospel (1 Corinthians 1:17); God sends his angel to the apostle John to communicate the revelation of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1).

In our sermon text, we are told that God sent John the Baptist. Like so many others, John was sent with divine authority on a divine mission.

As we read through the Old Testament, we see the record of God at work to do something about our human condition. He promised to Adam and Eve and to future generations to send a Savior to atone for sin and to rescue us from the power of sin, death, and Satan. Even when the Israelites, the people he chose, were unfaithful to him, he remained faithful to his promises. He called patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to carry the promise from one generation to another. He sent prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah to prepare people for the coming of the Savior. At times, he gave very specific information through these prophets about the Savior to come. He promised, he called, and he sent so that even in the worst of times and situations, people could see that God was at work, and, as a result of his evident work, they could rejoice that there were greater things to come.

John was sent to ***“bear witness about the light.”*** His message was clear: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”*** (Matthew 3:2). He baptized people in the Jordan River and it was a Baptism unto repentance. Judging by the crowds that came to be baptized by him, there was a “buzz” about him and his message. Perhaps for some, it was curiosity, because he certainly did appear as a curious figure. He was clothed in camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist; his food was locusts and wild honey.

Whether the people were merely curious or had a heartfelt desire to hear his message—his call to repentance—and to be baptized by him, the Bible tells us that ***“Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins”*** (Matthew 3:5–6).

The religious leaders, the Pharisees, sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him who he was. Was he the Christ? Was he Elijah? Was he the Prophet, the one like Moses whom God had promised to the children of Israel in the wilderness that he would raise up? Who was this man who was drawing so much attention? Was he someone who, perhaps, might rally the Jews to overthrow their Roman rulers?

Later on, referring to Jesus, John the Baptist said to his own disciples, **"He must increase, but I must decrease"** (John 3:30). In our text, he tells those who are questioning him, **"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'"** (v 23). John was sent by God on a divine mission as the forerunner of greater things to come.

When we look at John the Baptist, we see greater things yet to come, because John points us to Jesus, and when we look at Jesus, we see the true light of the world!

Each of the four Gospels has an account of John's ministry and message. In essence, it is a prologue or a foreword to what follows: the account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the subsequent proclamation of Jesus as the Savior of the world. He is the one whom God promised to send in order to redeem fallen mankind. Clearly, in Jesus, God was at work. Doing something about our sinful condition.

However, in the Gospels, we read of resistance and opposition to Jesus because he didn't meet the mistaken expectations of people. Those who were politically minded wanted a revolutionary leader to overthrow the Romans. Instead, he tells them, ***"My kingdom is not of this world"*** (John 18:36).

Many of those who had witnessed the miraculous feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand wanted him as their “bread king.” Instead, he tells them, ***“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst”*** (John 6:35).

Even in today, people have mistaken expectations regarding Jesus. Some see Jesus as simply an eloquent voice for a better society. Some see him as a twenty-first-century “bread king” who wants everyone to have worldly wealth and that this wealth is available for the asking. Some also see him as irrelevant and want nothing to do with him. None of these human expectations has ever come to grips with the most basic problem of all—that because of the sin we inherited and the sin we commit, we are broken and dying people in a broken and dying world.

When, in faith, we look at the One to whom John testified as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we can look forward to greater things to come. That which has separated us from God, that which so often brings hurt and pain to human relationships, is forgiven because the Lamb of God, his own Son, took our sinful nature along with all our sins to the cross. There he put them to death by his own suffering and death. John's Baptism was one of repentance. But there were greater things to come. In our Baptism, we were baptized into Christ's death so that just as he was raised from the dead, we have been raised to a newness of life.

As you look at your life today are you stuck in the fatalistic philosophy of "it is what it is"? Have you lost sight of the wonder of forgiveness, life, salvation and all we have in our crucified and risen Savior?

Have you forgotten the wonderful promises that, through Christ, God causes ***“all things [to] work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”*** (Romans 8:28)? Do you look to the future with fear because of the uncertainties of life and in the world? Do you dread that time when your earthly life will come to an end and you will stand face-to-face before a holy and righteous God?

Permit me to share greater things. To those haunted and bothered by sin, guilt, and shame, ***“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”*** (Romans 8:1). For those who face uncertain times, illness, or even imminent death, God promises ***“I will never leave you nor forsake you”*** (Hebrews 13:5). In Christ, we have a genuine reason to rejoice always.

Today, as we rejoice at what God has done and at the greater things to come. ***“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it”***

(1 Thessalonians 5:23–24).

Amen