

+ Matthew 11:2-10 + Rejoice in the Big Arrival! + Third Sunday in Advent + 13 December 2009 +

Have you ever gotten so excited that you couldn't sleep? That you couldn't sit still? Imagine a little child getting so excited they're literally shaking with anticipation at what they are about to receive or the person they are about to meet. That kind of excitement happens to older kids and grown-ups too. You get excited about getting your first car or first home, your graduation or wedding or the birth of a child, a birthday or Christmas. You get excited, because you've been waiting for that special day.

Were you that excited last night? Did you have trouble sleeping? Do you have trouble sitting still because you're so joyful? Unless you have big plans after church today, I doubt it. I doubt that before you went to bed last night or while you got ready for worship this morning, you thought, "Hey, we're halfway through the season of Advent. It's time to rejoice! It's time to get excited! Christ is coming soon!" As much as I would love to know you're that excited about the turning point of Advent, it's understandable, especially when it seems there's so much more to get excited about this time of year.

Still we are halfway through Advent—only twelve days left until Christmas. It is the Third Sunday in Advent and we did light a different Advent candle this morning. There's a reason for that. You see, for centuries, this Sunday has been known as *Gaudete* or "Rejoice!" Today amidst our watchfulness and waiting, our repentance and preparation, joy and hope start to build. Christ and his Big Arrival are coming soon. This morning the Savior comes to you through his Word to stoke your joy and expectation. Jesus urges you, **REJOICE IN THE BIG ARRIVAL!**

Expectation can be a funny thing. The longer you have to wait for a special event, a special gift or the arrival of a special someone, the more it grows. The expectation of a young man and woman grows as they near the day of their wedding. The expectation of a husband and wife grows as they near the birth of a child. The expectation of a child grows as Christmas nears when she'll give special gifts to mommy and daddy and even get special gifts herself. As expectation grows, excitement grows with it, but sometimes that excitement can cause your expectations to become unrealistic.

The time finally arrives, but things don't turn out like you expected. The baby leaves little sleep for mom and dad and needs late night diaper changes among other things. After the honeymoon, the reality of two sinful people living together under one roof becomes apparent with arguments and hurt feelings. Christmas comes and goes. Gifts wear out or break or are forgotten. The excitement that fueled your expectation starts to slip away.

John the Baptizer had high expectations. After all, he was sent to **"prepare the way for the Lord"** through the hearts of the people. He proclaimed a message of repentance because the Messiah was coming with judgment and power. **"After me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."** John prepared the way for the Lord, even pointing the crowds to Jesus. **"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"**. (John 1:29)

With his good news shared, he expected glory and judgment and deliverance to come, but it seemed like nothing changed. Sin still ruled the day. John, the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets, found himself locked away in the prison of a drunkard king, whose bimbo step-daughter would soon have John's head on a silver platter. Where was the judgment, the deliverance, the glory while he sat there? Where was the One who had come to take away the sins of the world? The certainty of John's joy and expectation started to get shaky and threatened to slip away.

So John sent his followers to ask Jesus a question that would confirm his expectations. **"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"** Jesus understood how John's joy in the good news of his Big Arrival had started to slip and might even disappear, so Jesus sent back this message with John's followers, **"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."** Rejoice in what has been done.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Just moments ago we heard almost those exact same words from Isaiah (35:4-6a), **"[Your God] will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy..."** and later in chapter 61:(1b), **"The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."** For an Old Testament believer like John, that was great news. Christ was doing everything exactly as God had promised. Jesus was giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He had raised the dead and was preaching the good news of the unimaginable wealth of God's forgiveness given freely by him to the spiritually poor. It refilled John with joy.

Jesus had come to save. That good news of what Christ had done brought true joy to John in his last days, but does it bring joy to you this Advent season? Does that good news of what has been done fill you with excited expectation

for Christ's Big Arrival or do the trials and troubles and tribulations of this life, not to mention the busyness, the failed expectations, and the sin leave you joyless and unimpressed? Yes, you know the story of the Babe of Bethlehem. You've heard it time and again over the years, but has that oft-told story lost its excitement? Does it fail to take your breath away anymore? Do the reality of sin and its daily effects make anticipation for Christ's Big Arrival on the Last Day seem like a useless exercise when you have more pressing things to deal with? Do you ever find yourself like John, losing your joy and excitement in Christ expecting more from him, while the sinful world and your sinful nature seem to keep winning?

Jesus understands how your joy can slip and nearly disappear. So he sends you to his Word to **rejoice in what has been done**. ***"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*** He sends you to his Word where he promises, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*** (Matthew 11:28) He sends you to his Word where he prays from the cross, ***"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing"*** (Luke 23:34) and answers that prayer with ***"It is finished!"*** (John 19:30) Your sins are forgiven. Your salvation is won. Heaven is yours. It's all done, finished!

Jesus sends you to his Word, where he promises, ***"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age"*** (Matthew 28:20) and ***"Behold, I am coming soon!"*** (Revelation 21:7) He sends you to Holy Baptism, where through water and Word he forgives your sins and makes you his own. He sends you to his Holy Supper, where he promises, ***"This is my body... This is my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."*** He sends you to the Gospel for true joy.

Are there ever times when what you expect seems at first to be unimpressive? You look forward to a special gift from a loved one, but when you open the gift, you find that at first glance it looks like a piece of junk. The giver then explains the gift and you realize how precious it really is. I recall one Christmas giving my father a brick. It was old with some chunks of mortar. It looked like junk, but then I told him where it came from. It had come from the building his grandparents had built after World War I.

The same was true of John the Baptizer. He was an unimpressive and even strange man. He wore camel's hair clothing and ate locusts with wild honey, yet the crowds had flocked out into the wilderness along the Jordan to hear him preach. Why? Jesus explains why the Lord had used such an unimpressive man. ***"What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'"*** Jesus, the Son of God, had taken the unimpressive John and made him a prophet unlike any other, giving him the best news of all—Christ is finally coming! After thousands of years of waiting, his Big Arrival is coming soon!

Just as unimpressively, Jesus did what needed to be done to bring you true, lasting joy. He came in poverty and lowliness, the child of a virgin mother, whose reputation was surely questioned. He willingly gave up popularity with the crowds to proclaim the truth and gave himself up to ridicule and suffering. He died the death of a common criminal on a cross and even had to use a borrowed tomb. Only a few saw him in glory after he rose. Still with such unimpressive actions, Jesus accomplished the impossible. He saved you, just as he promised. He forgave all your sins, just as he promised, so you know he will come again, just as he has promised.

Now he comes to you through Word and Sacraments. Frankly, the Bible, Baptism, and Communion don't seem impressive at all. At first glance, they're just words and water and bread and wine. Perhaps you're tempted to think that the Lord could've done better with something more noble and special, but through those meager, unimpressive means, the Lord accomplishes miracles. He connects you to Christ and to all that Christ has done for you through faith he creates in your heart. Through those means, he forgives your sins, strengthens your faith, and grants eternal life. He gives you every reason in the world to be filled with excited expectation.

So are you excited yet? Is your expectation growing? Christ is coming soon! Yes, he came once in an unimpressive way and comes through unimpressive means, but soon there will be no missing him. We've reached the turning point of Advent, so let's get excited. Christ's Big Arrival is coming soon! Dear friends, rejoice! Amen.