

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I'd like to begin on a personal note.

Some of you may remember Rachel Field who was a parishioner and member of the choir here during her first two years at the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale.

I had the great fortune of being able to attend her ordination to the priesthood yesterday afternoon in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, where she is the curate at St. Mary's Church.

I took to her your prayers and thanksgivings for her ordination, and she sends her prayers and thanks back with me to you.

I pray that she will continue to be the guiding light that many of us have known her to be, and I know that the Church will continue to be blessed by her ministry and her varied gifts.

You may have noticed that the candle in our Advent wreath this week is pink.

This is because the third week in Advent is often referred to as *Gaudete* Sunday, or "Rejoice" Sunday.

This may seem a little out of place in the midst of Advent, but there is a reason for it.

Advent began its life, much like Lent, as a forty-day period of preparation for the celebration of Christmas.

During both seasons, candidates for baptism would undertake a program of penitence and fasting before their eventual reception into the Church on Christmas Eve or the Great Vigil of Easter.

Both Advent and Lent prepare us for the unexpected arrival of Jesus – at his birth and at his resurrection,

And Gaudete Sunday was originally intended as a bit of a mini-break from the rigours of the penitential season.

Its name comes from the text of the introit that was traditionally sung on this Sunday:

Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.”

And we have much to rejoice about!

We keep Advent as a reminder that the Lord is always on his way.

We look to the past and celebrate his miraculous birth while simultaneously looking to the future for his coming again in glory.

The word Advent, after all, is the Latin translation of the Greek *Parousia* which means “second coming.”

Advent, therefore, is a liminal space between the already and the not yet.

Because we know that God’s salvific work in Jesus Christ has already begun.

And we also know that it is not yet fully accomplished.

The mystery that began in that first Advent two thousand years ago continues to play out here and now as we wait yet again for the Word made flesh to dwell among us.

This liminality – this sense of in betweenness – is beautifully exemplified in our lessons for today.

We begin with an oddly out of place reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

Biblical scholars have traditionally divided Isaiah up into two, large sections:

Everything before chapter 40, and everything after it.

These roughly correspond to the years leading up to the Babylonian exile and the years that follow the return to Israel.

The exile was a great scandal for Israel.

The destruction of the temple – the only place where God was properly worshipped – and the deportation of the city's leaders in 586 BC suggested to some that God had failed the chosen people.

The return from exile, therefore, was seen as God's great triumph over the enemies of Israel, and a renewal of the promise that Israel was indeed God's chosen people.

Today's reading from the prophet is a prime example of the joy and elation that must have been felt at that time:

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.”

God's redemptive power is not only at work for the people, but for the whole of creation itself.

The earth will blossom with new life when God redeems it.

What was once barren will bloom, and what was once dead will live.

Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice!

But you may have already noticed the problem here.

This passage is clearly celebrating the return from exile,

And yet it's placed, as chapter 35, in the final section of the pre-exilic material.

Scholars have mused over why this might be, with most attributing it to some sort of scribal error.

But whatever the cause, we are left with a prophecy that is out of place, and out of time.

A forward-looking prophecy to which we continually look back.

While some may view this as a problem to be solved, I choose to embrace and live into the paradox it presents, because it reminds me that God never works in the ways I expect.

John the Baptist learns this lesson himself in today's reading from Matthew.

John, you may recall, was the first to recognize Jesus for who he was, and proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah to his followers.

And yet now, here's John, in prison because of the content of his message, and unsure of who Jesus actually is.

John's expectations for the coming Messiah were that he would be a military leader – someone to overthrow the armies of Rome and free Israel once again from the tyranny of foreign rule.

So even though John has recognized Jesus as the Messiah, he can't quite figure out what it is Jesus is up to.

And so he sends out his disciples to ask a sensible question.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus' response, however, is anything but straight forward.

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Jesus once again subverts all expectations.

His answers force John to take on a new role and to learn how to follow Jesus.

How frustrating it must be to go from leader to follower; from teacher to student; from prophet to disciple.

Moreover, Jesus' answers must have shocked John and anyone else who heard them,

Because his roundabout answer isn't actually saying that he's the Messiah. He's saying something much more.

His answer to John's question is a near direct quote from Isaiah, the text of which both men would have known well.

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

Ever so indirectly, Jesus casts himself in the role of God, and he tells John that the redemption of the people and of the land that is promised by God . . . will come through him.

No wonder John is confused.

Jesus hasn't come to overthrow a first-century empire. He's come to reorder society for all time

And as Mary predicts in her Magnificat, this reordering will cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly; fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

And because we know this fact to be true, that Jesus is the incarnate Son of the living God, then it is only through Jesus that the rest of Isaiah's prophecy finds its meaning:

“A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

“No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.”

I confess this passage used to cause me some worry.

If the unclean aren't able to follow along the Holy Way, does this mean that God intentionally leaves people behind?

Now. I confess I've never really understood the doctrine of predestination –

And I have to confess further that I understand it even less after a semester of Anglican history and theology at Yale Divinity School –

But I've never really been able to get behind the idea that the God of love and compassion that I've been called to follow is a God who would choose to keep some from the path of Salvation.

I've come to realize since, however, that the unclean won't be able to travel on the path because there are no unclean to *be* left behind.

Jesus has redeemed every last one of us.

Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice.

And if, as Jesus is telling John, he is already healing the blind, the deaf, the mute, and the lame, then surely the Holy Way isn't far behind and we will all know the everlasting joy of God's kingdom very soon.

But here is where our expectations are subverted once again.

“Be patient,” the Epistle of James extols us, “until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.”

The early rains are necessary in farming so that the ground is soft enough to plant in, whereas the late rains are needed in order to allow the grain to ripen.

Jesus' birth prepares us to hear and receive his Good News, while his second coming will ripen us for the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

Neither works or makes sense without the other.

John, like James, and like us and every Christian who has come before us, finds ourselves in that space of waiting between the early and the late rain.

We are here in Advent looking back to past promises that have been fulfilled and will be fulfilled sometime in the future.

A liminal space between the already and the not yet.

So how do we be patient, especially in this time of political and social uncertainty and anticipation?

Do we sit back and let history take its course while we wait for the second coming, and for God to make all things new?

Or do we, like John, continually relearn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

One of the demands of the Christian life is that we re-orient our wills and submit them to God's.

It's tempting to think that once we've accomplished that, we can stop worrying about it.

But turning to God isn't a one-time event – it's a daily exercise that requires our constant dedication.

Some days we get it right, and some days we don't.

But on those days we do, it's not enough to assume that God will do the heavy lifting for us.

No.

As the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila reminds us:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.”

God and God’s Christ work through us now.

And we do well to remember that the Messiah we follow is one who continually upsets expectations.

Who was born into the world only to be crucified for the sake of our redemption.

Whose resurrection from the grave foretells the glory of his second coming.

And who associated with the outcasts of society and called out the powers that be for not doing the same.

Throughout the Gospels, the bringing of the good news to the poor and the outcast is the most basic test for true discipleship.

Isaiah’s prophecy to restore Israel to its former status is essentially a promise to make Israel great again.

Time Magazine recently selected president-elect Donald Trump as its person of the year, declaring him to be the President of the Divided States of America.

The promise to make America great again has us, like Israel, looking back to an idealized past for the promise of a better future.

But Israel is made great when the deaf hear, and the blind see; when the proud are scattered in their conceit and the lowly are lifted up; and when all are free to walk on the Holy Way of our Lord.

Now, more than ever, Christ needs our hands, our feet, our bodies, and our voices to ensure that the path is open to everyone.

And when it is, *then* we can truly rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, we will rejoice.

Amen.