

The Third Sunday in Advent is known by a few different nicknames. Some call it Rose Sunday, since it is marked with a rose candle on the Advent wreath and in some places, rose vestments, symbolizing the joy we feel as we pass the season's halfway point and recalling the tradition of a relaxation of Advent fasting. Some Episcopalians call it "stir-up Sunday," with the language of the Collect reminding bakers of Christmas cookies to start their work. A few still know it as Gaudete Sunday because the old Latin service for this day begins with the words, "Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete" meaning "Rejoice in the Lord *a/ways*: again I say rejoice."

Whatever you call it, this Sunday is meant to offer a change of perspective from the seasonal themes of darkness and penitence to the joy we feel in anticipating Jesus being among us. So naturally, today I want to talk about despair. We don't think about despair very much, not even when we feel it, but most of us have experienced the feeling at one time or another. Hope can cast out despair as swiftly as light casts out darkness, but the good intentions of those who would comfort us don't necessarily bring us hope.

I'm reminded of a moment in the movie "Home Alone" where, after Kevin's mother realizes they left him behind, and she's despairing and berating herself, Uncle Frank tells her, "If it makes you feel any better, I forgot my reading glasses." In our own lives, many of us have suffered through well-meaning comforters offering platitudes or wishful thinking, trying to minimize our experience, telling us other people have had it worse, or if we are suffering from the acts of another, might even ask us to consider our antagonists' point of view.

So, for instance, you should never say, you think you've got problems? At least you aren't like the people of Israel who had been defeated by a foreign power and taken into exile by force. At least you aren't a political prisoner of a craven and ruthless autocrat, like John the Baptist, who knew he would be put to death, probably gruesomely, and probably on some stupid whim of Herod's. Yet even Israel and John defied their circumstances and remained hopeful, and theirs was not a false hope, because they hoped in God, and stayed faithful through their darkest hours.

Although the Gospels were written by people who knew how the story turned out, they show us that, apart from Jesus, nobody knew what was going to happen, and there are even some hints that Jesus himself may have known doubt. So even though John the Baptist had been proclaiming Jesus, and had been so confident about Jesus's divine identity that he balked at baptizing him, as John was rotting in prison, doubt apparently set in. Maybe he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come," in order to assuage *their* doubts, or even get them to stop following him and start following Jesus, but John doesn't strike me as very subtle or indirect. I read the question as sincere, especially given the explicit second part, "or are we to wait for another." And it was a fair question, since from John's point of view, things were looking pretty grim.

Jesus knew that we tend to believe things more firmly and deeply when we make

the conclusion ourselves. He knew that part of God's respect for human autonomy is allowing us to hold false and unrealistic expectations. Expectations can shape our understanding and behavior, but what shapes our expectations? Ourselves and society, certainly, but we're better off when we look to God's revelations to set our expectations. So Jesus also knew that his fellow Jews had a wide range of expectations of what the messiah would be. Some of those expectations were consistent with Biblical visions of grace, healing, and redemption like the one we just heard from Isaiah, and others were distortions. Jesus addresses all of these.

Instead of simply saying "yes, I am the messiah," which anyone could have said — and many did — Jesus turns John's disciples' attention to what God was revealing through him. Jesus lays out the evidence: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. Indisputable, concrete signs of Jesus's messianic identity are public knowledge. Jesus also chides those who have let human qualities warp their idea of what a messiah will be like.

The bit about the reed is a little obscure, so we tend not to pay too much attention to it. Reeds were used to dish out physical punishment. Later in Matthew's Gospel, immediately after Roman soldiers force the crown of thorns onto Jesus's head, they "put a reed in [Jesus's] right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head." More recently, a Mike Myers character recounted, "When I was insolent, I was placed in a burlap bag and beaten with reeds... pretty standard, really." Does this mean we should interpret Dr. Evil as a Christ figure? No, it does not.

Anyway, I think that when Jesus criticizes those in the crowd who expected "a reed shaken by the wind," he's using an ancient metaphor for someone who dishes out punishment freely — an understandable desire for a population suffering under occupation. As is the desire for a ruler whose nobility is evident at a glance, in expensive robes that conform to social expectations of displays of wealth and privilege that had come to be associated with power. Understandable expectations, until you think them through and compare them to what God has actually revealed. Some messianic expectations boil down to brutality and elitism, but that is not God's way. In her great song, Mary points out that those are the sort of people God overthrows.

At the other extreme, suggesting that those with physical ailments are not only not cursed by God, but loved by God, would likewise have been theologically and Biblically sound, and challenging to the human penchant for prejudice. We know from our own experience that spiritual and physical health are connected. Relationships and theology are connected, too; we treat sick and disabled people differently when we see them, correctly, as beloved of God, rather than ignored or punished by God. So, as challenging a notion as it might be, we shouldn't be surprised when in the same breath as miraculous feats of healing, Jesus lists giving good news to the poor as a sign of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. As Isaiah points out, it's all connected. We can

easily dismiss giving hope and encouragement when we compare them to more concrete ways of helping people, but if you have ever lived in despair, you know how important, how invaluable, real hope and empathetic encouragement can be. So Jesus lists them as a way God saves us, and makes God's nature known to us, and even if we can't offer miraculous cures, we can give hope.

Perhaps appropriately given the occasion, Jesus also adds a note of warning: blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. The Greek word translated "offense" really means "scandalized." But what is so scandalous about healing and hope? Remember that people in those days commonly believed that misfortunes were divine punishments, and indeed, many people today think that too, so telling and showing people that God actually loves "those people" was truly revolutionary. Not new, but threatening to the people who thought their comfortable lives meant they had earned God's favor. And if suffering is not God's punishment, who is responsible for it? Who is responsible for causing suffering, and who is responsible for healing it? We can see why the powerful saw Jesus as a threat.

But threatening people was never Jesus's goal. The whole point of divine intervention is to do something new, different, and better, and so Jesus offers a greater hope than what humanity might ask for, the same hope that kept Israel and John faithful even through doubt and hardship, hope that is so powerful because it is not the hope of humanity, but rather the powerful, affirming hope that comes from God. Knowing that God is loving, merciful, and mighty, they lived in the knowledge that the words of the prophets were not wishful thinking, that when Isaiah said, "Be strong, do not fear! ... [God] will come and save you," when he promised wonderful things to people who had lost everything, Isaiah's words came not from his heart, but from the heart of God.

And so it is for all those who know who God is. We can share in the same hope, the same joy, when we are willing to let go of the expectations that come from our own desires and the norms of human society and look instead for the wonderful, beautiful things that God is already doing all around us. We won't always get our way, which can cause us to despair, but when we focus instead on God's ways, we will *always* find reason to rejoice. And we add to the rejoicing by proclaiming these same truths to those who walk in the darkness of this life. So again I say, rejoice.