

Sermon – John 1:6-8, 19-28
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
3 Advent – Year B
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“Rejoice Always?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Who are you? The older I get, the more I answer this question by pointing to someone else. You might think this is a sign of increased wisdom or humility, but I’ve always been wise and humble. I kid, of course! No, it is simply the case that who I am is increasingly wrapped up in others. Who am I? I’m the father of the second soprano from the left, or the kid playing alto sax in the second row, or number 99 on defense. I am who I am in relation to them. And while that is a particular set of relationships that helps make me who I am, one certainly need not be married or have children for the same principle to apply. To borrow the African concept of Ubuntu, I am because we are. You are who you are, in part, because of the people next to you: those with whom you sing hymns, with whom you break bread, with whom you serve others. No matter how cultivated our interior lives, none of us is an island unto ourselves. To know who you are, you must look and point to others.
2. Of course, if we understood this better, perhaps we wouldn’t have needed Jesus. There would have been no John in the wilderness, preparing his way by declaring our need to repent. So much of our sin is turning inward upon ourselves, forgetting our dependence upon God and each other. So, John enters our Advent wilderness once more today, reminding us of our brokenness and our deep need for the One who is coming into the world. Having stirred up quite a scene, the priests, Levites, and Pharisees have had

their curiosity piqued. Who, John, are you? Oddly, he first simply says who he is not. "I am not the Messiah." Neither, he says, is he Elijah returned from heaven, nor the prophet promised by Moses. The closest he comes to a straight answer is when he says he comes to straighten the way for the Lord. Who are you, John? His answer is to point them away from himself, to prepare them to receive Jesus.

3. Will we ever be prepared? Each year, Advent does much to remind me that getting ready is almost impossible. Even now, our outdoor Christmas lights have made it no farther than our back deck where they've been sitting in their boxes for over a week. Perhaps we'll get to it yet. Of course, John is less concerned with home exterior illumination and more with preparing for the Light to which he testifies. Paul, pointing us to the return of Christ, speaks of our need to be sound and blameless. Frankly, it's more likely I'll get the lights up than stay blameless. And what of Paul's other injunctions, to rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, give thanks in *all* circumstances? These seem beyond my abilities and, perhaps more to the point, seem to ignore the deep darkness in which we often find ourselves. Seen through the lens of secular celebration, Paul's words miss their mark and rattle around like one more voice telling us to be merry – or else! But Paul doesn't tell us to rejoice and give thanks because nothing is wrong in our lives or in the world around us. He is pointing us to Jesus.
4. British theologian N.T. Wright, reflecting on his ordination to ministry, recalls the many notes and cards he received from family and well-wishers. Most of them contained words of encouragement, well-intentioned sentiments about doing his best to live into his holy calling. But the card that meant the most to him quoted this passage from 1 Thessalonians, reminding him that "the one who calls you is faithful." Who we are and what we do is rooted not in ourselves, but in Christ. We will not always be faithful, but Christ will. Life will not always be easy, but Christ comes to us in the midst of it. He is the

wellspring of our joy in all circumstances. We need not, dare not, skip over Advent to claim a false joy, trusting instead Christ's presence and promise for us in this blue, bluesy season.

5. Who am I in this season? As much as I point forward to my daughter and sons, so do I point back to my mother. This past Monday I flew up to Minneapolis spend the day with her in her new room in memory care. I pulled up Grace's Advent/Christmas concert from the day before, giving thanks for the miracle of YouTube. As we watched and listened, my mind wandered back to afternoons spent with her at the Congregational church where she was the director of music as she prepared for Christmas Eve lessons and carols, and to Saturday mornings spent in the balcony of our Lutheran church, flipping through comics and sticker books while she practiced the organ. I don't think I would describe this past Monday as a happy day, but it was a day marked with deep joy, a day that reminded me that I have so much for which to be grateful; that so much of who I am, so much of my faith and so much of why this season's songs mean so much to me, is because of what she poured into me. This joy, which cannot be overcome, does not come from me or those who came before me. It flows from Christ and his faithfulness to us during this season of hospice waiting. He has promised, and he is faithful. That is enough, is it not?

6. Who am I? Who are we? We are the ones who, like John, point to and proclaim Jesus. Our world still contains the multitudes mentioned by Isaiah: the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captive, the prisoner. Our Advent calling is not to paper over the world's woes but to shine light into them. The world groans under the weight of sin and suffering. The circle of violence seems inescapable. We live in a world in which innocent hostages are killed by those who sought to save them, while bombs fall upon yet more innocents. Give thanks? Rejoice? Yes. Not to ignore the darkness, but to proclaim that light is coming. Because, as scholar Paul Hanson points out, God's love for

justice does not simply mean that God makes laws, but that God will make all things right. We remain steadfast, Hanson writes, “for the God who remains faithful to God’s promises reigns.”

7. Who are you? You are those called and chosen by Christ, gifted to one another that together we may point to Jesus. As lights in the darkness, rejoice. In solidarity with those who suffer, pray. In the midst of everything, give thanks. Why? Because it is Christ who calls you. He is faithful. He will do this. Look to Christ and discover who God’s grace has made you to be. Point to Jesus and prepare his way. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.