

Sermon for 3 Advent
December 11, 2022
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

Isaiah 35:1-10
Canticle 3
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Today is the third Sunday of Advent – Rose Sunday. The date moves around according to when Christmas falls. This year it falls on December 11.

December 11 itself has significance. Later this morning, the Orion capsule will splash down as an essential step in returning to the Moon.

Significantly, December 11 also marks the 50th anniversary of the last time humans set foot on the Moon.

Apollo 17 was the last of the missions. Eugene Cernan and Harrison Schmidt were the last men on the Moon.

Interestingly Schmidt was the only scientist in the Apollo program, and under his expertise, Apollo 17 was the most productive of the lunar landings.

Among his findings was “orange dirt” on the gray moonscape which turned out to be nodules left over from an ancient volcanic outburst. He also found evidence of water on the moon, something previously believed not to exist.

This December 11th is also the 80th anniversary of the death of the Rev. Captain Frederick B. “Ted” Howden Jr.

He died of starvation in a Japanese prison camp in the Philippines.

We celebrate Ted Howden as a saint in the Diocese of the Rio Grande, and expect his name to be entered into the Episcopal Church’s Lesser Feasts and Fasts at the next General Convention.

He was known to have given his rations to the men in the camp who had families, and so deprived himself of nutrition.

His self-surrender made sure that many of the men from New Mexico survived the death march after Bataan and lived to tell the tale following the end of World War II.

His life will be celebrated at a Mass at 3 p.m. today in the Cathedral of St. John, Albuquerque.

I believe that service will be streamed on the Cathedral’s Facebook page.

But this morning, we celebrate Rose Sunday, and there’s a slight disconnect for me today between the reality of the day and the interpretation of the day by the readings.

‘Twas always such, I imagine,

because the observance of this as Rose Sunday is traditional,

but the lessons don’t turn to the rose of the Christmas story,

but to the thorn – John the Baptizer.

This is Gaudete Sunday.

The term Gaudete is broadly translated from Latin as Rejoice.
Today we lit the pink candle instead of another blue one.
We have rose-colored accents
because we take a break from the anxious feelings
of Advent and express our joyous anticipation
of the Lord's coming.

It's all wrapped up in Isaiah's prophecy:

“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

The Gospel today recounts the role of Mary's cousin John's role
as a witness to the coming of the world,
a witness to testify to the light of the world.

Like John, Mary was a witness to the birth of her son,
his growing up, his death on the cross, and his resurrection.

That's why I chose that we read Canticle 3
instead of the Psalm today.

I think it expresses the wonder and joy that our hearts feel
when we realize the gift we've been given
in the birth and sacrifice of Jesus.

Canticle 3 is also known as the Magnificat.
It is Mary's song.

Can any of us really imagine what was going through Mary's heart
as the angel told her that she would bear God into the world.

Remember, Mary was just a girl,
thought as young as 12 or maybe as old as 15,
So young a girl to bear the weight of the world
and to carry the world's salvation to term.

This is the mystery of the incarnation.
Mary must wait, patiently, on the birth of our Lord.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear! ...
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.

Impressive words from Isaiah.

Christians have always claimed Isaiah as the prophet
who is proclaiming what Mary is waiting for – the birth of her son.
And in the Christian context, that's perfectly appropriate.

In the Jewish context,
Isaiah is talking about the release of the people of Israel
from bondage in Babylon, and their return to the promised land – to Jerusalem, the Holy
City of Zion.

All it took was patience.

As it says repeatedly in the Psalms: “Wait upon the Lord.”

Israel must be patient.
The Lord must be patient.
And for us, as the days of Advent tick by, we must be patient,
as Mary was patient.

I can remember as a child how hard it was to wait for Christmas.
The presents under the tree were ever a temptation.
It was an incentive to learn to read
so you could figure out which ones were yours.

Patience was in short supply,
and one year, it was just too much.
I don't remember how old I was, maybe around five or six,
and I found where my mother had hidden the Christmas presents.
I looked and found out what I was getting.

Come Christmas morning, there was no surprise.
I knew what I was getting,
and when I ripped off the Christmas wrappings,
that was what I got.
No surprise. Bummer.
It was the absolute worst Christmas of my life.

From that point on, I never wanted to look.
I wanted no idea.
Even today, I put off unwrapping gifts for as long as I can.
As long as the wrapping stays, it remains a gift, a mystery,
and it retains the spirit of the gift.

Once the wrapping comes off,
the gift stops being part of the mystery.
It loses the spirit of the gift and becomes a possession.

You'll probably hear me say this often, bear with me.

I believe the message of Christmas
is that every child should be treated as the messiah.
Every child should be nurtured and educated and encouraged
to be the person they were born to be,
the shining light that God meant them to be in this world.
Each child is precious in God's sight,
and every child should be precious in our sight.

We are called to work for the Kingdom of God
in the here and now.
Part of that call means working to make sure
that children receive every opportunity to achieve their potential,
that they grow up knowing they are loved and cherished.

That's what we are called to do for the young,
and it is what we are called to do for each of us as we grow –
to encourage each other to be who we are,
to care for one another, to assure us that we are God's beloved,
so that each of us can say:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.”

Know this, each of you are God's beloved,
and cherished now beyond measure.

Amen.

