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St. Mary the Virgin
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Advent 3 A 16.12.11**

The sermon opens with the first 50 seconds of “It’s The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” sung by Andy Williams]

The cultural message of this season is pretty much summed up by the little holiday ditty sung so enthusiastically by crooner Andy Williams.

As we heard in this morning’s gospel reading, this is not the song that John the Baptizer was singing from prison! Today as we light three candles on the Advent wreath, the third lighted candle is to remind us of joy.

But John the Baptizer was anything but joy-filled and there are many people, and some of you are here today, who find this season to be a time of depression, despair, heartbreak and gloom. Like John, there are many folks who look at their lives in light of their expectations and they are sorely disappointed.

The holiday season is touted as a “family time for togetherness.” Yet what if you are alienated from your family or they from you? Or maybe they are far away, or you really don’t have any family. Or worse yet, maybe your family is like the one I grew up in, where pretty much every holiday gathering became an excuse for too much liquor and a resulting boisterous quarrel, with harsh and destructive words, people walking out angry and a general mood that was a far cry from “Peace on earth to people of good will.”

A New Yorker magazine cartoon pictures two college students in their dorm room. One says to the other, “My family likes to set up our grudges at Thanksgiving, stew over them through December, then take our revenge at Christmas.”

Most of us would prefer to make changes in our lives. Like John the Baptizer as he sat in prison pondering the fact that he had given the best years of his life playing second fiddle to Jesus and now he is wondering, as we sometimes wonder, wasn't Jesus suppose to be something a bit more splashy and spectacular than what been seen so far?

Where, wonders John, is the fire, the harsh judgment, the deliverance from bondage to the Romans? Where is the wrath of God? Why isn't my life turning out as I expected, why isn't Jesus fulfilling my expectations, wonders John. There is something very wrong here and John wants answers so he sends some of his followers to question Jesus. "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus' answer to John's question is rather indirect and very much in the spirit of what 1500 years later would become Anglicanism as he appeals to scripture, tradition and reason.

Jesus speaks to his religious tradition by quoting the scriptural writings of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus asks John's disciples to look at what people were experiencing and to use their reason in reporting back to John. "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."

Jesus did not fulfill the conventional expectations of what a Messiah would be. John shared those conventional expectations and so he was sadly disappointed in Jesus.

If you take the time to read the stories of the prophets in the Hebrew Testament, people like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and especially Hosea (who took a prostitute for a wife to show how God loved the people of Israel even as they prostituted their own faith by following other gods and oppressing the poor), read the writings of these Old Testament prophets and you will discover how the work of God often goes against prevailing expectations and the popular mind.

John wanted and foresaw the coming of a vengeful Messiah who would crush the sinners, as they deserved. But he, and we, get a Messiah who tells us things like, “turn the other cheek,” “forgive,” “do good to those who hate you,” “be healers,” “love those on the margins,” “put away the sword and be people of peace.” These concepts might sound good in the abstract but they are tough to hear, let alone put into practice. They challenge us to do what is right in the Lord’s eyes rather than necessarily going along with the current opinion polls or heeding the pronouncements that come out of the mouths of our politicians.

Some say that politics have no place in the pulpit and I agree that partisan politics have no place in the pulpit. However what always belongs in the pulpit is the Christian gospel and that gospel has tough things to say to us about politics, economics, the primacy of love, the necessity of forgiveness. John the Baptizer was in prison because he dared to mix religion and politics. John criticized King Herod Antipas because the king took his niece as his wife, a niece who had been married to Herod’s brother. “Repent,” says John. “Die,” says Herod.

Clearly, things did not turn out as John had hoped. At this time of year, many of us are painfully reminded that life for us has not lived up to our hopes and expectations. Yet, yet, there is still Jesus who comes to us as he has always come among those needing healing, being present for the lonely and lost, the hungry and poor, binding up wounds and breaking the bread of compassion and love with all who recognize their need of him and even reaching out to those who do not recognize that need.

If you find yourself struggling to find “joy” in this most wonderful time of the year, remember that Jesus comes to you in the chances and changes of this life and sometimes you have to look beyond your wishful thinking about life. In the

midst of the mess and disappointments if you observe carefully you will discover the gentle and humble ways in which Jesus comes to you, not as a magician or fairy godfather to fix everything, but as a Savior to redeem, to restore you.

The presence of Christ comes to us in the strangest of ways and the oddest of times. We come to know that presence as we move beyond our disappointments and look for the love that is here, now, even in as unlikely a place as a prison cell or a stable in Bethlehem or in the greeting of a store clerk or on the faces of those lives are blessed by the assistance that comes their way through the efforts and gifts of our parish community, especially through the funds raised through our annual fundraiser, Tidings of Comfort and Joy, which I'm pleased to announce has raised almost a new high of \$50,000.

This is the season to recognize once again that the Messiah comes to us not just at Christmas but every day. May all of us open our hearts and our eyes to receive him and discover anew that true joy is ours even in the most challenging of times. AMEN