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Advent 3 Series A 2016

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Third Sunday Advent, Dec 11

If you differentiate the colors of the candles on your Advent wreath, you will be lighting the pink candle this Sunday, the joy candle. This joy motif comes from the Introit for the day, which begins with the Latin “Gaudate” the imperative “Rejoice!” Hence this is often called Gaudate Sunday in liturgical materials you might be reading.

The Advent season has asked us to think about the coming of the Lord Jesus, both in terms of his first coming in humility and his second coming in glory but it asks us to do that remembering in a spirit of Joy. We have already noted that contemplating Christ’s reappearance on the last day is not so much a matter of fear but of hopeful expectation for the people of God. Our light and our life is on the way, our rescuer, our beloved comes. The world is fixated on losing all the stuff to which it is so attached. We are rejoicing that the one who is greater than all earthly treasures will soon be ours so amid their fear we rejoice. Our Jesus comes to us!

Of course, in so far as we have enmeshed ourselves with the world, we might find his coming fearful as well. But that is what Advent is really calling us to do: repent of those sins and that world. Jesus did not come to put any bandage upon a broken world. He puts no new wine in old wine skins, no new patches on old garments. He did not come to praise the marginally alive for their ability to cope with sin. He came to raise the dead to a new life. While the rest of the world frets at its death and passing, we do not fixate on its creaks and groans, it is dying. These creaks and groans, these terrors and hurts are but precursors to His arrival. We are not so tied to this world, in it but not of it. We are bound by his love for us to Him and to His kingdom.

And so this day finds us looking around ourselves and seeing the world for all its problems and issues, and we rejoice. There is not a problem out there that is bigger than our Savior’s love for us and this world. There is not a tear he will not wipe away, there is not a hurt he will not heal, there is not a death he will not undo in that great and final resurrection.

It should also be noted that this is not an appeal to some other-worldliness. Christ comes because he loves this world and would make it anew and fresh. The destruction he wreaks is not to replace it with something which is less real, but something which is more real.

Collect of the Day

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Why do we implore God to hear us? He has promised this, has he not? Is this because we need to pray? But if that is the case, doesn’t that make this into a prayer to us? Is this really an acknowledgment of our own sinfulness, that it is not normal for God to listen to people like us, so just keeping it honest and admitting God should not listen to us and only does so out of mercy and grace? Another way to think about this is to notice that God loves it when we rely on his

promises and on him. Begging God to do what he promises is not denying the promises as much as it acknowledges our need for what he has promised.

We implore Jesus to hear our prayers and lighten the darkness of our hearts by his gracious visitation. In discussing this prayer, we thought this sounded sacramental to us. The refreshing and enlightening visitation of God happens in the sacrament. We don't partake of the Lord's Supper just once, checking off that box, and never returning. We go again and again, returning to the enlightenment we need.

The darkness of our hearts should not take a lot of elaboration, but I believe the modern does not recognize it for the darkness that it is. Or worse, we like the metaphor but we have completely forgotten what the darkness actually is. What is the darkness exactly? The word is intended to summarize or dramatically portray something that is bad and contrary to God, whom we acknowledge as light. But what is the darkness? Is it pornography, evil desire, lust, addiction, or greed, jealousy, and something else? When Christ comes and shines his light, what happens to these things? The preacher is called to shine the light into dark places.

He needs to do this because as a culture we are convinced that we are really pretty good, and as a result when someone actually takes a look inside their own heart and discovers just how black it is down there they are often utterly confused by and lost before what they see. Because in our culture we don't recognize that blackness, we don't really have a way for people to deal with it or to prepare them for this. But being a Christian does prepare us for that reality. And so we often are in a position in which we can see people who do some pretty odd things with their darkness. Some of them start to revel in it, challenging the world to call it darkness. Others just bottle it up inside themselves until they cannot bear it any longer but without a healthy way to deal with darkness, they get destructive. The recent rash of school shootings and other headline grabbing incidents seem to reflect some of this. Still others become quietly desperate. They know that they are profoundly disordered, but they think everyone else is normal. They don't realize that all of us are carrying around the same black heart and every sin, every sickness, every ache, and every night we fall into bed exhausted is proof of it. They believe that they are alone in their condition. They despair.

The Christian has another way to look at this. The darkness is real, but it is not the final truth. Christ's gracious visitation changes the darkness into light. This is where a preacher may need to make some choices to get his sermon manageable. The visitation of Jesus could be today in the sacrament and the Word proclaimed. That would make a great sermon and would have a real Advent theme as the purifying Word and Sacrament of God come and purge our lives of the darkness. This sermon is about the radical transformative nature of the Kingdom. The other visitation we all yearn for is the visitation that is not sacramental in nature, but the revelation of Christ in His glory. It is not sacramental because on that day there will be no hidden form under which we encounter Christ, but we will see the real thing and experience them with our eyes. It will be the same Jesus, but no longer under the forms of bread, wine, water, and our fellow

Christians. On that day the transformation will be complete, we will see him as he is because we will be made like him (I John 3:1-3.) On that day all the tears will be dried and the darkness forever banished (Isaiah 25:8.). This second way of talking about the Advent is a sermon about Christian hope and joyful expectation.

Either of these is congruent with the joy theme. The joy of the first sermon is the joy that addict feels when he reaches another milestone of sobriety or being clean. The joy of the second is that expectation that our otherwise unbreakable addiction to sin will one day be broken by the one who wrote our DNA, who understands us better than even ourselves. He will raise our flesh to a life which does not rebel against him. We can hardly imagine such a life, despite Isaiah's vivid portrayal, but that is simply a failure of our imagination. We long for it nonetheless.

Which one will we preach? Can we preach them both in single shot or is that a hopelessly complex task? I tend to think that it is too much for one sermon with the typical congregation's listening skills.

In past we wondered if this prayer is perhaps also able to be understood another way. Are we praying that Christ shines a light into our darkness? Does that enable us to see and realize the darkness and the hidden realities which are masked by darkness? Or is the darkness the problem? Is the darkness really the brokenness of our sinful condition? Is Light the Gospel which dispels the darkness or is the Light the Law which shows us our sin and makes ready the way for Christ the Savior to do something about that sin?

Darkness never dispels light, but light dispels darkness. If you open a doorway between a lit room and a darkened room, the darkness does not diminish the light in the room, but the light drives out the darkness. Darkness is fundamentally a lack of something, light. What is the lack in our hearts which we label darkness?

Readings

Isaiah 35:1-10 *This reading is the entire chapter of Isaiah.*

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;

² it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart,
"Be strong; fear not!"

Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.”

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

For waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;
the unclean shall not pass over it.

It shall belong to those who walk on the way;
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

These words of Isaiah figure prominently in the answer the Jesus gives to the disciples of John in the Gospel reading we hear today. The response of Jesus, however, is also significant because it is found in this 35th chapter of Isaiah, as the prophet speaks of the restoration of the lost people of Israel and Judah.

Many contemporary scholars think that these sections of Isaiah have to be written later because they imagine that these words are only appropriate for a people who have been taken into exile. What is not remembered, it seems to me, is that at the time of Isaiah, the whole land of Israel was brutally savaged by the armies of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king. He hauled the northern ten tribes and many people from the south into a brutal exile from which they did not return. Only

the city of Jerusalem itself was spared. All the surrounding cities and countryside of Judea were laid waste and its peoples deported. Their claim just doesn't seem that convincing to me.

This certainly would make sense for folks in the 6th century exile, but it also makes a lot of sense if Isaiah is writing to comfort the folks of 8th century Jerusalem who have been humiliated before a foreign king and watched as he burned their fields and seized their relatives and friends to be carted off to distant lands as slaves.

The comfort he offers is replete with imagery. The desert shall blossom and bear fruit. This is not only the deserts of Judea, but also the desert of human heart, rendered dry and lifeless by sin. And this blooming shall not merely be the blooming of a typical Judean hillside after it rains but it will be the glory of Lebanon's great forests, the verdant growth of Carmel and Sharon which gather moisture from the Mediterranean's breezes and convert it to the lushness which rivals that of the Pacific Northwest. For one who had spent his time in the dry and dusty land of Judea, this would have been unimaginable. But Isaiah asks them to imagine it. Those dry and dusty hills of Judea indeed did see the visitation of God, the glory, the majesty of God revealed in the fruit of another sort of tree, the cross on which Jesus died.

Isaiah then changes his image, the feeble knees are strengthened, the trembling and weak hands are stout and strong once more. God is coming with vengeance upon our foes. He comes to wreak his justice on our behalf, so buck up, take heart, and lift up your eyes.

The enemies of this body shall pass, the lame will not merely walk but leap like a deer, the deaf will hear, the mute will sing for joy, the blind shall see.

The enemies of this world shall be overcome – the deadly drought of deserts shall turn to a pool where the thirsty find relief. The haunt of jackals and wild beasts shall no longer be a place of terror but become gardens and the arid hills of dried grass shall be the site of swamps and verdant green.

But best of all, the enmity which God has for a rebellious creation will be overcome. For the sinner, the greatest problems are not to be found in the effects of sin, in the death, disease, pain, and anguish which mark this short time we call life. Our greatest problem is to be found in the thundering law and stony silence of a holy God. His Law thunders down his expectations and the consequences of missing that mark. Those who appeal to any contingency are met only with his stony silence. There is no mercy in the holiness of God, only isolation and death for the sinner. Isaiah himself considered himself lost before the holiness of God in chapter 6, his call vision.

But Isaiah sees that his people are not lost. They have sinned and they have offended the holy God whose seraphim in chapter 6 continually praise his holiness. But God has more than one attribute. His mercy and love carry the day. A way through the desert life is also provided, the Way of God's Holiness. Upon this way will come no wild beasts to devour us; no enemy will waylay us there. Only the ransomed and redeemed of the Lord shall walk its path. Even if I am an idiot, I cannot get lost on this path, for my own map-reading skills are not what put me there.

I won't need google maps or any other navigation system. God puts me on that road and he keeps me there. The result is that the redeemed of God return to Zion and there they are crowned with everlasting joy and gladness. Sighing and sorrows flee away from us there.

This suggests a number of things to me.

1. *The constant excuse making we have for our own sinfulness is really a mistake. God listens to no excuses for why I am the way that I am, it is time to admit it and be done with all the excuses.*
2. *The answer to our problems, all of our problems, is not to be found in any sort of psychotherapy, self-esteem, economic reversal, education, or other solution. The solution to all our problems is to be found in the solution that God provides, and that solution is found in Christ.*
3. *I really want to be on that path. – Praise to God that in baptism he has put me there. Jesus himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!*
4. *I know where I am going, and that is a very good place. All my weaknesses and darkness shall pass, and even now are passing in Christ.*

Psalm 146

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

² I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

³ Put not your trust in princes,

in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

⁴ When his breath departs, he returns to the earth;

on that very day his plans perish.

⁵ Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the LORD his God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them,

who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed,

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the LORD!

Once more the psalm is really the prayer of the person who hears the sermon and gets it, who really takes it in. The preacher might use this to conclude the sermon or he might use the elements of the psalm as an outline for his sermon.

Vss. 1-2 – Intro – we are praiseful beings. Our whole existence is one in which we praise the living God as long as we have life.

Vss. 3-4 – The Law – there is no other help. The powerful of the world are helpless before the same foes we are helpless before. Their money, their technology, and their resources do not result in some immortality, only a few more comforts, but all graves are equally cold and hard places.

Vss. 5-7 – The Gospel – Blessed is the man who has God as his helper. God can and does defeat the foes which defeat even the most powerful of men. God, who has all the power, is also merciful and gracious. He created the stars of heaven, but he looks out for the poor and the weak of the earth.

Vss. 8-9 – The Gospel realized – God's mercy and goodness mean that his power is put to the advantage and benefit of those little people. Prisoners are released, blind see, deaf hear, etc. The ravages of sin do not always hold sway, but God, who has the power, uses that power for the good of his creatures.

Vs. 10 – Recapitulation – God has power and authority – but we earnestly and honestly praise him, because it is God, our God, who loves us. Praise the Lord!

James 5:7-11

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.

⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Notice how James uses the same imagery as Isaiah, the early and late rains in the dry and wilderness places.

The story of James' death might be a great way to preach this. He was caught up in the unrest which led up to the Jewish revolt of 68-70 AD. In one of the episodes of the decade prior to the revolt, the Zealot party got hold of James and put him through a kangaroo court trial and finally cast him from the temple roof. It was sort of a Taliban terror operation in which they take the leader of the other party and do a public execution in order to terrify the rest of his people. According to tradition, the fall from the temple roof did not kill him. They then stoned him to death. In the case of James, however, the Zealots miscalculated badly. His death was generally mourned and even the non-Christian Jewish population thought this was a great tragedy. He was known as James the Just, respected by all. You can read the story of this in Josephus and Eusebius.

James exhorted his people who were waiting for the last day to patience. I want that road of which Isaiah speaks to start showing up in my life. I would like the monsters to be put away from me now. I would like my desert heart to bloom with God's everlasting peace and joy. James exhorts us to patience in the face of that promise and the long time it seems that the promise is taking to be fulfilled. The temptation of the impatient is to try and hurry things along. It doesn't work. Abraham tried that with Hagar, it did not work out so well. There are no shortcuts to the kingdom of God. I might try to make this world a little more like I think it should be, but it doesn't really work that way. I may be a part of Christ's great work, but I am not the one who decides when and how He shows up.

And so when I see the other not doing his job, it behooves me to remember that my own life is not all that ordered and perfect. The judge comes. He will take care of my neighbor's ills and he will take care of mine. The goal is that I want us both to be expecting the merciful Lord of heaven and earth to come. The Lord is compassionate and merciful. He loves the neighbor as much as he loves you.

This suffering way is simply the modus operandi of God. Look at Job and the prophets of old. They suffered, but not because God loved them less, indeed as part of their very ministry to the people of God. Consider Hosea's marriage, Jeremiah's misery, even noble Isaiah was said to have been martyred by an angry king. Suffering is part of the package.

Matthew 11:2-15

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

¹⁶“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

*¹⁷“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’*

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

This reading always occasions an interesting question to which there is no firm answer. Why does John send these disciples? Is he seriously having doubts? That seems inconsistent with what we imagine a prophet is like. He has a word straight from God, he has pointed out Jesus as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, why would he doubt? Some have suggested that his is John teaching his own disciples, getting them to ask the question so they themselves can hear Jesus give the answer. That lets John be the prophet we think he should be but it does rather make him manipulative or at least give the appearance of manipulation. I am also somewhat skeptical of an interpretation whose primary strength is that it makes a Biblical figure easier for me to understand. I find that the Gospel is often embedded in the very things I don’t really understand in Scripture all that well. A person who acts in a way that seems irrational to me is often the occasion for God’s upside down kingdom to show up.

What do you think? In prior years when we considered this very issue we wondered if this text is really more about us than John. Are we, the reader of the text, cast in the role of the questioner here? Is the last part addressed to the “would be” disciples? Is this the radical Jesus who doesn’t fit my labels and categories for a messiah? How surprised will I be on the last day when I see the strange crowd Jesus draws to himself? Will I be shocked to see the sorts that he hangs around with? What did the crowds think of John?

Many have seen that Matthew, writing about 30-40 years after these events he is recording, may be dealing with a group of John's followers who are holding John up as the Messiah, and not Jesus. We know that Paul runs into some of these John followers in the final verses of Acts 18 and the beginning of Acts 19.

The original setting aside, this is a potent affirmation of the reconciliation that is brought to us all. We are all under God's judgment and yet as members of the kingdom, we are all children of God. The littlest child who is still dripping with the waters of her baptism into the kingdom of God is greater than any prophet because Christ's gift to us makes us greater. John did the prophet thing better than any ever did. But that does not make for real kingdom greatness. In being united to Christ in death and resurrection, we are united to God himself. That is the day that prophets of old yearned for, imagined, and spoke about. We are living in it.

If we see John as really having doubts, will we need to explain how that can be? Why? I wonder if we don't sometimes get distracted by these questions from the real point Matthew seems to be making, the answer of Jesus to the questions. I don't need to know why John asked the questions, but I need to hear Jesus' answer to the questions. What is there to learn from John's questioning, if anything? Could it be that John took his own message more literally than we have? When he says that the one who comes after him is ready to pour out fire and cast the unfruitful tree into the fire, did he think that was the primary attribute of Jesus' ministry? If that is what John thought, Jesus did not meet that expectation. He welcomed the sinners, he ate with the prostitutes, and sent them away with "Go and sin no more." He did not let his disciples call down fire from heaven upon the village. He rebuked them. Was John in fact justified in feeling that Jesus was not meeting expectation? We know that there were many within the Jewish community who rejected Christ for that very reason. He did not look like the messiah they expected to come.

On the other hand, if we see John as instructing his disciples, why does Jesus quote this verse in Isaiah, and not the other places where these sorts of signs of the kingdom show up and it includes "freedom for the prisoner?" John will not get out of prison, at least not with his head attached to the rest of his body. Is John asking the Lord if the prophecies are all true? Is Jesus telling him "yes, but not that you will see this side of heaven? It is true but you won't see the "get out of jail" prophecy which probably concerns you most."

Law

1. Is Jesus really the one? If he is the one, why does this world look so messed up? Is there another one to come after you?
2. I want the vision which Isaiah portrays, but I want to skip the cross. Give me a nice life, but don't ask me the tough questions of who I am. I want glory, but not the cross. I am basically OK, just give me a little cosmetic work.

3. I love this old world, and that old sinner in me loves this old and broken world too much. It is good to love the creation of God and delight in the things in which he delights, but let's be honest here. My delight does not always or even often track with God's delight.
4. This reality that I am out of synch with God often brings about much woe in my life, some of it self-inflicted, and some of it is just the bite of life and death. Often my life feels like a desert dreary.
5. I struggle with the solution that Jesus brings to the problems of the world. In my haste, I would like him to fix things my way, in a power way, as long as that doesn't bite me.
6. But the truth be told, if he fixes things in the power way, I am toast. Sin has too firm of a grip on my life and your life. If he separates the wheat and the weeds right now which side do I fall on? A quick survey of the way I spend my money, my time, my energy would not be an accounting that I would like. God calls me to repent of this.
7. I have many things wrong with me and as I get older that list is not getting shorter. Am I looking for a God solution to those problems or is my trust in medicine, healthy living, some quack cure, my stock portfolio, or something else? Our culture loves to entice us to trust in anything other than God. But God is the only one with the real solutions.
8. When Christ sends all my sins to hell, will I be sad to see them go?

Gospel

1. Yes, Jesus is the one! He has come to address every woe. His answer, however, will demand patience of us. For his answer to the problems of the world will involve dying on that cross. It feels inadequate until you remember the whole incarnational piece. This is God on the cross, that death matters.
2. Our own life, our own woes, and our whole life are all placed on that cross with him. That transforms what I see when I look in the mirror and when I look about me to the people in my life. It even transforms the way I see my troubles. I am on the way of Holiness, the lion cannot devour me there. He may take this physical life from me, but I have already lost it on the cross, it hasn't been mine since my baptism. The new life, which is mine in the kingdom of heaven is unassailable by him. He cannot have me, that is written in heaven, out of his reach.
3. Christ is compassionate and kind. The woes of this world which the devil intends to work against me and my faith, he often turns to toward his faithful goals. The suffering brought on by the exile surely delighted the evil one, yet it also was the

occasion in which God cleansed his people of their idolatry. Even when the consequences of my sin fall heavily upon me, I can know that even here Christ is working for my eternal blessing.

4. There are many things right now that I can thank God for solutions to my woes, some are temporary, but others are eternal. The rupture of relationship is not an eternal woe, but Christ has given me words of real forgiveness and healing I can speak. The blindness of our eyes may be treated by a surgeon or simple eye glasses in anticipation of the day when my eyes will be made perfect once more.
5. He has poured out the Spirit promised in last week's lesson. The path to heaven is opened to us, the lame and the blind, the deaf and the mute all are empowered to walk upon it. The desert of my life can bloom with the showers of his love and peace. It is still the path to heaven, I am not there yet, but I can start to see its blooms through the eyes of faith.
6. God does not leave us without warning and pleading. He genuinely wants us to turn and live. He does not delight in our death but in our life, to that end He is striving mightily on our behalf.
7. He cares about all the woes that sins bring upon us. He hates to see his good creation spoiled, even when we do it to ourselves. He grieves to see us hurt, and he longs to restore us. While his wisdom is sometimes hard to understand, his love us our comfort and our peace while we wait. We can rejoice in that in any circumstance.
8. Even that which we cannot seem to pull off of our own volition, the utter hatred of our sins, is not an obstacle to his great love for us. We find it difficult to completely commit to him, but his spirit groans on our behalf and we are kept in the one true faith. Our doubts, our questions, even our impatience with God does not overcome His love for us.

Sermon Themes

1. "He comes to Save you – and you're gonna like it!" (based on the OT and Gospel readings this sermon would that the hearer faithfully trust that God has the toughest questions in mind and our deepest dilemmas are in his competent hands.)

This sermon really starts off with a focus on the fact that we rather like our sinfulness. Yes, we all have those things we know are wrong with us, and we really ought to eat a little less, pray a great deal more, be more kind and loving, etc. But for the most part we tend to think that we are pretty good. But this is the pig thinking that his sty is not so bad after all, compared to some. He doesn't realize that it is dirty, smelly, and without much

in the way of value other than a place to keep a pig until the day you butcher when his accommodations will change to the freezer or the frying pan.

The horror of this is that God loves my freedom, so much that after pleading and begging me, he won't force my sins out of my hands. The sin is going to hell, and if I won't let go of it, I might just go with it. Isaiah noticed that the changes God wrought on the day of his Messiah would mean that even the outcast from the Jewish society would be walking on the highway of holiness. But their weaknesses would be transformed, their blind eyes would be opened. They would have to leave their blindness and lameness behind them to walk on that road. They could not cling to it.

Likewise the third Sunday in Advent calls us to rejoice in the great transformation that God works in us. We will not be the same people and that is a good thing. John is portrayed as not even able to recognize Jesus on the last day. He wonders if Jesus is really the one, or is another coming who will fit John's picture of a messiah better. Even the prophets have some remedial work that needs to be done. Paul would lament that the sin he hated was the very thing that he did. He also needed some help. We do too. God is not coming to prop us up, enable us, or help us limp along in our sin. He is coming to remake us as he has always wanted us to be.

That is a terrifying thought. I like being in control of my life, of at least part of it. But in death I am utterly passive, and when Christ calls me forth, he makes all the decisions, he makes the changes, I will be changed, in a twinkling of an eye, I will see him with my own eyes for my eyes themselves will be changed.

That is a good thing. He has a much better idea of what I will need to live an eternity with him than I could even imagine in my sin-dulled mind. I can trust him. God is coming, he will do lots of things to me. I'm gonna like it.

2. "Joy amid the Sorrow" (Based on the Epistle and OT lesson this sermon would have the hearer recast the woes and sorrows of this world first as the very things for which Jesus died, and the very reasons that he reappears on the last day – this results in a persistent and durable joy which the world simply cannot take away.)

Isaiah and James tell their readers today that the day is drawing near, and that first of all means great joy. Isaiah sings about that eloquently and beautifully. There is not a trouble or sorrow which escapes the redemption which God has worked in Christ. We would want to broaden the understanding of what it is that Jesus has died for. We tend to see that as a moral redemption, but Jesus also cares about our whole broken reality, including our weariness, our fears, our poverty, and our anxiety for the future. There is no fear or threat which need cause us real alarm. That is not to say that those things are not real, but

they cannot touch our name which is written in heaven, the highway we are on is secure. On the highway of God, through the bleakest desert, we will walk in safety and comfort.

For James that same message translates into three virtues which mark the joyful anticipation of the Christian. Perhaps virtue is not the best word here. Three gifts from God for the Christian on that road might be better.

- a. Patience with God – the farmer must wait for the rain, he must wait upon God. No amount of fretting or worrying over this will make the rains come sooner. Farmers are usually a pretty stoic lot about rain, drought, and the like. They pray for it, they look for it, and when it comes, they let the rain do its job. I often want God to hurry up, but by the working of His Spirit on me and my life, I am given the patience which looks at the hint of a cloud on the horizon and wonders if today will be the day when God sends the rain. This patience looks a lot like the hope we might have preached about last week. The hope I have in God replaces my impatience with Him.
 - b. Patience with one another and ourselves – We are not to grumble about one another. The same judge is coming for them as is for us, and he sees all, he is right here. I don't need to be a score settling or vengeance taking sort of person anymore. I can be patient, even when the chips fall lousily for me. God has this in his hands and he will take care of this. I might pray to him, but I don't need to be taking it out on my neighbor. Their sins simply cannot take away my joy in Christ.
 - c. Steadfast and hopeful hearts – the prophets of old and Job are held up as examples for us. They waited, and they endured. It would be 800 years before Isaiah's words about Jesus were fulfilled. God's timing is not always our timing, but his promise keeping is steadfast and sure. The prophets surely sometimes thought things would turn out differently than they did. Just consider John in the Gospel lesson, but it was always ultimately better than they thought. We too can trustingly commit our future into God's hands. Who can shake me from his love?
3. Are you the one?.... (That the hearers would pick up the task of John the Baptist, sending his disciples to Jesus – leading folks to Christ.)

Jesus' answer to this question needs to stand at the center of this sermon. Jesus is the object of John's question. But it also works to take this from the perspective of the questions which Jesus asked of the crowds about John. Who did you come to church today to see? What did you expect? This sort of a sermon might then turn to the answers which Jesus gave to the disciples of John and look for the ways that Jesus is active in the world around us right now. You could point to the fact that when disasters strike, it is often the church groups that are there pitching in to help. You could point to the many

blessings which come our way from Jesus, whether it is health care, food, or the like. But you could also simply point to a miracle which has happened in your midst. Most of the congregations I have served have had one person in their midst who has a great miracle story. Tell that story – the sick are healed, the deaf hear, the blind see, etc. The news sometimes brings us stories of folks who are caught in blizzards and miraculously survive or who walk away from plane crashes. We thought that an illustration closer to home would be better. Perhaps there is a person in your congregation who is an example of Jesus' love expressed, perhaps a volunteer at the local food bank, homeless shelter or the like. Point to that person and note the face of Jesus.

This sermon wants to recast the vision of the world for the hearer. Jesus is present, he is doing things today for them. They can trust him. Bank accounts fail, pension plans only last until the day you die in the best of situations, but Jesus lasts an eternity for us. He is right here, right now, helping us. We often think that Jesus was for times long ago, for problems of the people two thousand years ago when he healed the sick and opened the eyes of the blind. But he is doing those things and greater things today.

In John Jesus tells his disciples that they will do bigger things than he did. We do those things because Jesus is working in us. This same Jesus who was recognizably the “One” whom John sought through his deeds, his miracle, this Jesus is still doing his thing today.

4. Greater than the greatest! (That the Holy Spirit would move the hearer to trust in the promise of God – the work of Christ on my behalf has established us in the eternal and blessed kingdom of God. We are greater than the prophets!)

This would be a great sermon to preach on Baptism, actually. For the answer which Jesus gives to the disciples of John and later to his own questions suggests with the rest of the readings for the day that God is really the answer to our deepest problems. If you have a small child in your congregation, preferably a newly baptized child, consider using that child as a sermon illustration. You could also do this with an elderly person, say an Alzheimer patient whom you visited in the nursing home this week. The person should be someone who has been baptized but whom the world thinks of as little or least.

We all know the stories of those prophets of old. Moses parted the Red Sea and brought water from the rock. Elijah raised the dead and called down fire from heaven. Isaiah saw God on his throne and was purified by the coal from the altar which is before God. Samuel heard God's voice. You could go on. We hear those stories of those heroic men and women of the OT and we would like to be like them. Good for you! but Jesus makes a startling claim today that the littlest child, the least person who has been united with him in his His kingdom, baptized, is greater than all the prophets, greater than John the Baptist.

We often seek to solve our own problems and one of the things that attracts us to the prophets is the power seemingly at their disposal. It would be handy to have that power to solve problems. But that is not the way the kingdom works, at least not normally. Jesus is the secret to the power of the universe and this little child who cannot take care of herself and is wholly dependent on the loving attention of parents and others, this child is greater than all those OT prophets. She has Jesus, he has come to her, looked her in the eyes, united her to himself in baptism. She is in his kingdom. The least in the kingdom of God is greater than a prophet.

John posed a question to Jesus today wondering if he is really the one. We ask the same question and too often we think not. We go running to other solutions for our problems. If we see them as gifts from Him, great, but too often they reflect our own desire to be the masters of our fate, the ones who are charting our own courses. We imagine that if we have the power, then we are going to do good with it. Really!?

Jesus' answer to John and his statements to the crowds who gathered around him serve as both a stern rebuke to our old man and a word of great hope to the broken sinner. There is no solution outside of Jesus. He solves the problems which no one else can solve. Even our solutions are simply contingent, they are not the final solutions. I might cure cancer but that just means a heart attack will get me another day. But to the one who realizes his or her helplessness, that we are like this little child, Jesus words are pure gospel. He can solve all our problems and he loves us.