

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I'm sure you have noticed how two people who share the same religion can turn out to sound and act very differently from one another. You can probably find your best examples with Christianity itself, among our various denominations and church bodies. But even within those particular groups there can be surprising disagreement and difference in emphasis. We are certainly aware, for instance, that not all Lutherans are the same. Even though we claim the same confessional heritage, we interpret and apply it differently. There are analogous differences within all major Christian groups. Not all Roman Catholics are the same, nor are the Eastern Orthodox, or the various flavors of Protestantism, which may or may not include Episcopalians, Lutherans, or the non-denominational folks, depending upon who you ask, because being Protestant is just one more thing folks in those groups don't agree on. And these days the larger political divide, both here in the United States and in many other places throughout the world, becomes yet another cause of division. Or maybe it has always been that way.

An awareness of these kinds of differences in our own time and place can help us to understand what is going on in our Gospel reading this morning, and also to appreciate the liturgical turn we take this week away from the end times to anticipating the new direction that God is taking in the world in Jesus.

Last week we heard John's ominous warning about the axe laid at the root of the tree. God was fed up with human unfaithfulness, injustice, and cruelty, and was coming to do something about it. And I'm going to guess that John was pretty happy about that. He had been watching, and had noticed how his people were suffering, both at the hands of their foreign occupiers, but also thanks to cooperation and corruption of some of their own people. Even some of their religious leaders were coopted. I imagine that John in this respect might have been like the young Moses, who noticed his people suffering and killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. But the Hebrews were not too keen on Moses rocking the boat, and so he was forced into exile, out into the wilderness where God met him in a burning bush, and, well, you know the rest of the story. We don't have those kinds of details about John the Baptist's background. We don't know his call story like we know Moses'. But we do meet him out in the wilderness preaching repentance, with the judgment of the prophets of Israel and Judah on his lips. And as is bound to happen when the powerful are challenged and corruption is exposed, John finds himself on the wrong side of the law, arrested and imprisoned. And then he hears about Jesus. From his prison cell he catches wind of the excitement surrounding Jesus' words and deeds. "Maybe he's the one!" John thinks. "Maybe now the revolution can begin! Maybe these dark days are finally coming to an end.

John's got to know, and so he sends messengers to Jesus to ask the all-important question. Funny how they ask it, though. Matthew has been naming Jesus the Messiah from verse one of his Gospel, so the reader already knows the answer. But John's disciples can't bring themselves to say the M word out loud. That would be considered seditious talk by the powers that be. And if Jesus *wasn't* the Messiah, they could end up like John. But Jesus' response is also measured. He could just say, "Yep, that's me!" But he chooses not to answer directly. So, is Jesus also afraid of speaking plainly? Maybe. But I think there is something else happening here. I think that a simple "yes" back to John, even though that would be the simple truth, would lead to a fundamental misunderstanding on John's part. And that's because John and Jesus are drawing

from different parts of the prophetic tradition. John is drawing from the ominous, apocalyptic parts, the parts announcing destruction and doom, and he is warning the people to get their act together before it's too late – before the axe falls. The words Jesus sends back to John, though, come from a different place. They come not from a place of threat, but of promise. Jesus is not the axe wielder, if that's what John has in mind. So, to send back a simple yes would leave John thinking, "Great! He's coming to break me out so we can go storm the palace!" Instead, Jesus reminds John of God's larger goal of healing and restoration, of new life in the face of hopelessness and despair. Because Jesus is not going to storm the palace and he is not plotting revenge on God's enemies. He is headed to the cross in order to put an end to our endless cycles of vengeance and destruction by taking our collateral damage upon himself, and making for us a way to life where there was none before. Because he is going for a bigger prize than Herod's throne, or Rome's empire. He means to storm the gates of Hell. By means of his own humiliation, pain, and death, he is planning to disarm and overcome the powers of sin, death, and evil.

I'm telling you all this now because you already know the end of the story. You know it already right here at the start of the new church year, when we are back to the beginning, preparing to celebrate Jesus' coming among us as one of us in the babe of Bethlehem. But John the Baptist does not know the end of the story. Nor do the disciples, which is why they are going to have strong reactions when Jesus reveals to them the plan of going to Jerusalem to die. They are, in fact, going to take offense at Jesus. Peter himself will get in Jesus' face and rebuke him for such an unthinkable plan. And Jesus in turn will rebuke Peter and call him Satan. So how do you think the fiery John the Baptist would have responded had Jesus given him a preview of that plan? Of course we can't know, but I can only imagine that John would take that as a "no" to his question and write Jesus off as a lunatic. And I think that he would have struggled mightily with accepting Jesus as the real Messiah had he lived to witness his crucifixion. Because even we who do know the end of the story struggle with how God has chosen to save the world in Jesus. We – like John, like the disciples – would like to see our enemies crushed and humiliated. A brief survey of our social media makes this all too clear. It's how we are manipulated. No wonder some who call themselves Christians these days are challenging their pastors for being "woke" or "communist" simply for reading Jesus' Beatitudes – you know, "blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, ...the peacemakers." Just to be clear, this has not happened to me. But I have heard and read stories. And those stories are *not* unbelievable. Even though they kind of *are*.

We are at a turning point in the Advent season today, a point at which we are encouraged now to look forward in hope to *Jesus'* way of dealing with our fallen world through his cross and resurrection, and trust that that is the way that leads out of our present trouble. We are encouraged today to trust that unlikely, counterintuitive promise even in spite of our lingering offence, and to rejoice in it. This is Rejoice Sunday, *Gaudete* in Latin, the day when we light the pink candle and anticipate with joy the fulfillment of God's promise. A friend of mine, who grew up in Berlin, has just written an article about this using the German word for this Sunday, which is *Vorfreude*. It literally means, "Pre-Joy." What we celebrate today has not yet come to pass. But because we trust that God is faithful and *will* make good on God's promises, we rejoice today as if it has already happened. And as we do, the power of the Holy Spirit will work on our hearts, to let go of our resentments and offences, and to face our future with confidence in God and resolve to be God's partners in loving the world back to life. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts rejoicing and our minds fixed on Jesus the Messiah. Amen.