

Week Three Rejoicing in the Light

3A John the Baptist: Witness to the Light

Pray

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)*

- Read Luke 1:5-25.

This passage includes the pregnancy announcement that begins the story of John the Baptist. Who were his parents, and what kind of people were they?

- Read Luke 1:39-45.

Who visited John's mother while she was pregnant? What do you think Zechariah felt as he was unable to speak, while the two women filled his home with conversation and praises?

John's very first recorded action is to rejoice in the presence of Jesus. His mother Elizabeth said to Mary, "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." (Luke 1:43-44)

The third week of Advent's theme of rejoicing is an ancient tradition. The third Sunday in Advent is called "Gaudete Sunday." The name comes from the Latin word *Gaudete* ("Rejoice"), which was the first word in many liturgical services for this day. The services would begin with these verses:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:4-6)

In some liturgical church services, this is called "Rose Sunday," because the altar cloths are rose-colored. That's why today's candle is pink. (I have to confess, I am kind of a rebel sometimes. And I really dislike the color pink. So I usually have white or green candles on my Advent wreath.)

- Read John 1:19-34.

Here we see John meeting Jesus. They are both adults now, and interestingly, John says he didn't know who the Messiah was until this moment. I always pictured the two boys talking about their futures as they grew up and keeping in touch (or perhaps their mothers keeping in touch!) as they began their

ministries. But although they may have stayed in contact, John didn't know all the details about Jesus until he proclaimed him to be the Lamb of God.

“Behold the Lamb of God!” was the statement John had been waiting to make. This was his big line in the drama of salvation. He had preached a message of repentance from sin, but now he stood in front of the perfect Lamb of God who would pay the penalty for sin once for all. John knew that the Lamb of God was the Light of the World.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. (John 1:6-8)

Later, John had his moments of doubt. And he had good reason to be depressed—he was stuck in a prison cell. Herod the King was wicked and immoral, and when John spoke out against him, he threw John into prison. When John's followers visited him, he asked them to go ask Jesus if he truly was the Messiah.

- Read Luke 7:18-28.

I love the way the Bible never turns its characters into superheroes. John was human, he was discouraged and he had doubts. Jesus answered him gently, quoting a prophecy that John knew well (Isaiah 35:3-7). Jesus went on to praise John, and then to make a statement about the kingdom of God, where the last shall be first and the first shall be last. I have puzzled over his words about John many times, but I don't think John found them puzzling at all. John's goal was always to “decrease,” to become less popular in order to glorify the Messiah. None of this “greater” and “least” stuff would have concerned him.

This last scene from John's life touches my heart. John has played his part and now he waits to see how his story will end. He wonders if he really has lived his life well and if he pointed people to the true Messiah. You probably know the rest of the story: King Herod ordered John's execution because his wife and stepdaughter/niece asked him to. It is a senseless tragedy. Why did God allow this to happen? I wish I had an answer.

I find comfort in the words of Jesus, “This is my body which is broken for you.” Jesus experienced a horrible tragedy himself. But it was not senseless. God allowed Jesus—his perfect sinless son—to die for our sins. He died for all the believers in ancient times who were looking forward to his coming (and that includes John!), as well as those of us who look back at the gospel writings about the cross.

When tragedy strikes our lives, God rarely tells us why. But he does give us Immanuel—God With Us, Jesus who promised never to leave us nor forsake us. And he gives us his light in our hearts.

Pray

*If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful,
for he cannot deny who he is. (2 Timothy 2:13 NLT)
be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.
(Matthew 28:20 NLT)*

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:4-6)

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)

3B John the Baptist's Disciples: Following the Light

Pray

*This is the assigned moment for him to move into the center,
while I slip off to the sidelines. (John 3:30 Message)*

Imagine, for a moment, that John the Baptist had a publicity agent. How might that agent respond to John and his changing role after he delivered his great line?

*Dear Mr. The Baptist:
In perusing the script,
I find it has potential, but as it stands
It can't be right
Your concept is just crazy enough to work:
Unlikely hero (have to talk to costumes and catering –
not sure where to source locusts or camel hair)
Loved that "Brood of vipers" line, but
Not sure how it'll fly with the critics.
I'd encourage you to reconsider the whole
Leading man switch right after the baptism scene
Always a little dodgy with the fans –
They've been following you, now they'll be confused.
You're probably going to lose some.
Diehards will stick with you, no doubt
I'm sure the Playwright knows what he's doing...
This bit of business on page 17 –
"JtB Exit SL, JC cross at center."
That's "Cross to center?" surely?
A cross at center would likely interfere
With the audience's view of the scene
Again, a bit confusing.
Just be certain of your role.
I'd have a word with your agent
Re: the scaling back of your part.
It's a good start, no doubt,
But it wants a bit of tweaking
To really make sense.
to today's audience.
–Mark J. Leamy*

Consider John's disciples and his fans. How did they feel when suddenly their leader told them to go follow someone else?

- Read John 1:35-41.

These verses tell us about two of John's disciples who left John and followed Jesus. One of them was Andrew, who brought his brother Peter to Jesus. The other disciple is not named, but it could be the Apostle John himself. He never does name himself in his gospel, so this could be his way of sharing his entry into the scene.

How do you think these disciples felt, after their time of following John the Baptist? Had they hoped that he was the Messiah? Was it difficult to suddenly follow someone else? How did they cope with this sudden change in their lives?

I noticed several things that these disciples did, actions that we can follow during unexpected changes.

- They talked to Jesus about everyday things—like where he was staying.
- They listened to Jesus.
- They didn't just listen—they followed.
- They brought others to Jesus.

How can we follow their examples?

- Keep up our conversations with the Savior.
- Listen to his word.
- Don't just listen: do what he calls us to do.
- Tell others about Jesus. Share the light!

Pray

*It is you who light my lamp;
the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness.
(Psalm 18:28)*

3C St. Lucia: Celebrating the Light

Pray

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105)

In our home, we honor my Swedish heritage by celebrating St. Lucia Day every year on December 13. For us, this celebration consists of the kids wearing paper crowns and bringing us breakfast (cardamom coffee cake) in bed. The Swedish tradition is actually for the oldest daughter to wear a crown of candles (thankfully, battery-operated now) and lead a small parade of her siblings to the parents' bedroom, carrying breakfast.

When I was a teen I was able to participate in several small church and school events in which I was St. Lucia. It was truly a magical experience to wear the crown (mine was electric) and walk through the dark room as its only source of light.

Historical records of the real St. Lucia (sometimes called St. Lucy) are a little foggy. The basics of the story are something like this: Born into a wealthy family in Sicily about 280 A.D., Lucia was a Christian in an era of persecution. As a young woman, Lucia vowed to remain single and serve God for the rest of her life. Lucia's fiancé was not pleased. He reported Lucia to the authorities, and she was executed. Several accounts state that she lost her sight due to torture, leading to somewhat gruesome medieval depictions of Lucia holding her eyes on a plate.

Tradition says that before her capture, Lucia served the poor in her community. Because her hands were too full of food to carry a lantern on dark nights, she made a crown of candles and used it to light her way.

Lucia means "light." Scandinavian countries celebrate Lucia's Feast Day on December 13, which was close to the shortest day of the year before the Gregorian calendar was adopted. I am always fascinated by this idea of celebrating light on one of the darkest days of the year.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you. (Isaiah 60:1-2)
The sun shall no longer be
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give light to you by night;
but the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
Your sun shall no more go down,
or your moon withdraw itself;
for the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended. (Isaiah 60:19-20)*

A Prayer for St. Lucia's Day

Loving God, for the salvation of all you gave Jesus Christ as light to a world in darkness: Illumine us, you did your daughter Lucia, with the light of Christ, that by the merits of his passion, we may be led to eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, 1979)

A Prayer for the Third Week of Advent

*Blessed are you, Sovereign Lord, just and true,
to you be praise and glory for ever!
Your prophet John the Baptist was witness to the truth
as a burning and shining light.
May we your servants rejoice in his light,
and so be led to witness to him
who is the Lord of our coming Kingdom
Jesus our Saviour and King of the ages.
Blessed be God for ever.
(Source Unknown)*

Pray

*The sun shall no longer be your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night;
but the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory. (Isaiah 60:19)*