

11 December 2016
Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Rejoicing in the Freedom of Christ”
Text: Matthew 11:2-15; Isaiah 35:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

John the Baptist is in prison. So are you. John’s bars can be seen. Yours cannot. But yours are no less strong. Maybe they are even stronger.

John’s prison is named for the king who put him there: Herod. Yours are named by what put you there as well. Yours are the prisons of fear, worry, doubt, anger, bitterness, sadness, loneliness, addiction, covetousness, and countless others that lock you in their grip. You try to escape, but the bars and bonds are strong.

And holidays like Christmas don’t release from those prisons, like many hope. That this year will be different. It usually isn’t, and often just makes things worse. When your Christmas isn’t a Hallmark Christmas. When your Christmas isn’t white, but dark. And when your expectations, hopes, and dreams fall short or come crashing down, they bring you with them. The prisons getting darker and deeper. That’s why the holidays historically show an uptick in suicides. People don’t see any way out of their prisons. For, they think, if Christmas - with all of its joy and happiness and hope cannot get me out - nothing can.

But Christmas can. Not the joy and happiness Christmas. Not the tree and gifts Christmas. Not the carols and decorations and the things-will-be-different-this-year Christmas. But the Christmas Advent prepares us for - the Immanuel Christmas. The God with us Christmas. Jesus’ Christmas. For He is the one who came exactly for this: to set prisoners free.

Isaiah spoke of this freedom. We heard him today speak of setting people free: opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, loosing the legs of the lame and the tongue of the mute. He spoke of setting creation free as well, providing water in the wilderness and streams in the desert. But all of this healing is not what Jesus has come to do - *it is a sign of who He is*. The freedom He has come to provide is much, much bigger than all that.

For as Jesus Himself said: what good is it to have two hands, two feet, clear eyes, and perfect health, and to be thrown into hell (Mark 9:43-48)? A prison from which there is truly

no release. There is something better. A freedom and life that lasts forever.

But it's not easy for us to think that way. That's why so many procrastinate - it's harder to think of the future more than the present. That's why so many cling to the things of this world - it's harder to think of the unseen more than the seen. And it's hard to think of freedom while the tyranny of the present and the "I need it yesterday" attitude of the world is pushing us so hard.

That's why we need John the Baptist. He always seems like an intrusion into our Christmas preparations with his fiery message of repentance. But if he's an intrusion, he's a good one. A much needed one. For he comes to help us think bigger. To think better. He comes to point us in the right direction. He is the divine GPS God sent to us, who is shouting to us: recalculating! Recalculating! Turn around. Repent. You're going the wrong way.

And that's what we see him doing today with his disciples. He sends them to Jesus to hear it - not from the horse's mouth, but straight from the Lamb's mouth. ***Are you the one? Or shall we look for another?***

Jesus answers with the words of the prophet Isaiah. That the coming one would do these things. But Isaiah spoke of something else that Jesus was doing as well - not just the healing, not just the signs, but more. A highway. A path. A way of life. He calls it ***the Way of Holiness***. And on this highway,

***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.***

Which sounds like exactly what we're looking for.

But can we walk on that highway? We can. You can. But not because you are clean enough or free enough or wise enough. But because you are *the ransomed of the Lord*. Those who have been bought and paid for by the blood of the Lamb. His blood that sets you free. His blood that washes you clean from your sin. His blood that sets you free from foolish ways and puts you on His way of wisdom. His blood that protects you from the ravenous, devilish beasts, who are prowling around looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

And so you are ransomed, set free to walk this way. Released from the prisons of sin and death. The sin and death in the world that press upon us from the outside in, and the sin and guilt that drag us down from the inside out. And set free from these, what is left?

Gladness and joy, Isaiah says. **Everlasting joy**. Joy that will last forever and never be taken away! But **sorrow and sighing**, Isaiah says, these **shall flee away**.

So the gift Jesus brings is not just healing for a while until the next thing comes along. And not just happiness until the next trouble and sadness come along. But a joy to have in the midst of trouble, a hope to have in the midst of sadness, a promise to have in the midst of uncertainty, and a life to have in the midst of death.

So it's not that John is in prison while Jesus roams free, doing all these good things for others but not for John. And it's not that you are in your prisons while Jesus seems to be helping everyone else, and you're thinking: *but what about me?* John is telling us today to recalculate our thinking. To think bigger.

For the very reason there **IS** a Jesus is because the Son of God came down from heaven to join us in our world of sin and death. He came down into our prison to be with us here. He was laid in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn (Luke 2:7). He was homeless, having no place to lay His head (Matthew 8:20). He was rejected, by friend, foe, and family alike (Mark 6:4). He was taken prisoner. And then He was sentenced to death. Wherever you are, He is; that where He is, you may be. And that includes the grave. The grave which shouted to the shaken disciples: *See? He was not the one. You should, you must look for another.*

Until Jesus rose from the dead. And with that, the construction of Isaiah's **Way of Holiness** was complete. And though the disciples still experienced what Jesus did - they too were rejected, abused, locked up, and put to death - yet they were free. No matter what happened to them, they couldn't be imprisoned. For they belonged to Jesus. His victory was theirs. His joy was theirs. His life was theirs.

And so, too, the apostle Paul. When he wrote the words we sang twice in the Introit today - **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!** - guess where he was? In prison. But just like John, he is free. And even from prison he testifies. Of the joy that is ours. Of the Saviour that is ours. Of the freedom that is ours - a freedom that no bars of iron or vengeance of man can contain.

And that's why we lit the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath today. For today the mood of Advent turns from penitence to joy. And so **Hark the Glad Sound!** (LSB #349) and **Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding** (LSB #345) we sung today.

But you've already heard such glad sounds and thrilling voices. The glad sound of the voice of your Saviour when He **baptized** you and washed you clean in His blood. And His thrilling voice which said to you again this morning: **I forgive you all your sins. You are mine.** His voice which proclaims the **Gospel** of all that He has come and done for you. And His voice which comforts you again with His presence here and now: *This is*

My Body, This is My Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. And when you are forgiven, you are free. For there is no prison in all of creation stronger than His forgiveness.

And so our prayer today is answered. The prayer that we prayed that said: *Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts* - the darkness of our prisons, of our sadness and sorrows, of our pains and worries and all the other things that lock us up in guilt and fear - *lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation*. And if someone told you you could have a Christmas gift like that . . . wouldn't that be the best gift ever?

And lest you think that only for John . . . for look at how great John was! Even Jesus said of him that ***among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist***. He was the prophet of prophets. The last and greatest Old Testament prophet.

But lest you think that, remember that Jesus said this too: that as great as John was, ***yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he***. And that's you. For there is something greater than prophet, and that is *child of God*. And that is what you are. A child. His child. Forgiven and free.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.