“Turning Towards Joy”

A sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)

by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

Scripture reference: Matthew 11:2-11

This third Sunday of Advent is also known as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Sunday that many folks think of as a break from the darker Advent themes represented by our purple candles—themes like repentance and holding hope even in the darkest night—to light our pink candle. The JOY candle!!!

For me, though, the joy candle does not symbolize a break to experience joy. Rather, it honors the immense presence and importance of joy to accomplishing the work of Advent. It is a reminder that repetance, hoping in the dark, and even recognizing and welcoming new life are not possible without joy. We light the joy candle smack in the middle of Advent because joy is the nourishment that gives us the strength and courage to repent and hope and welcome new beginnings!

Repentance got a bad name for me somewhere…maybe in hearing folk atop street benches or on subway cars name all the actions that would get one on the track to hell and then shout “repent!” Or, maybe even hearing it in scripture, itself. Just last week, John the Baptist exhorted those in his day to repent, lest they should experience the wrath that was to come.

And yet, repentance, though it may be unnerving, is ultimately life-giving and freeing. What is translated for us as repent is the Greek word Metanoia, which means either to turn around, or to change our minds. It encourages us to let go of thoughts, perspectives, and life circumstances that bind us, and encourages us to take on God’s own imaginings and hopes for our lives.

To repent, is to turn towards God and the life of freedom and fulfillment that God invites us to. And, as we just sung, turning is what happens to the world when God’s vision for it takes hold.

Figuring out how to repent—how to turn—is probably the most important work of Advent, and the hardest. However, we can find the courage and commitment to practice it when we anticipate the joy that God will gift us with in the process.

Whether we simply turn within the current context of our lives, or whether we turn and journey into a substantially new configuration of life, joy awaits.

When I was Kate’s soccer coach last year, my co-coach and I, always just a bit late and just a bit disorganized, would ask the girls to dribble their soccer ball around the outer lines of the field while we scrambled to set up our drills for the day. The girls would dutifully take a ball and one, after another, after another, in a long line, plod along the white edging. They would shout occasionally from afar, can we be done yet?

Until, one evening, after taking the front position in the line, one girl just…turned…she turned right off the white line and into the green of the grass…and she sped up, still somehow controlling her ball, and yelled with glee, “follow me, you guys!” And they did! They created a system for taking turns being the leader, and every practice, they would race for their ball, get in their line, and turn all around the field, their dribbling skills and confidence improving in proportion to the number of turns and the joy they felt!

Turning ourselves and our lives towards God’s liberating love can be the experience of my soccer team—if we honor the longing to turn…to put aside the “instructions” the world has given us for how we “should” be or what we “should” achieve…and turn off the white lines and into the green grass, joy awaits. Living in the expectation of this joy, clinging to it as a divine promise, which it is, is what embues us with the ability to turn.

This is not to say that repenting is as easy as dribbling a soccer ball off the lines. It often has much more substantial consequences. In addition, although the Christmas story of visiting angels, and stars overhead directing the people of God which way to turn sets us up to expect clarity, we often won’t really know which way to turn, we’ll only feel the urge, the longing, to do so.

And it is because of this reality, that our Gospel passage today, on Joy Sunday is so instructive. We have John the Baptist in prison, wondering if he’s made the “right” turn. This is the man, remember, who as an infant, lept in his mother’s womb when Mary announced her pregnancy with Jesus. This is the man who was so committed to the liberation promised in Jesus and his ministry that he made a life in the wilderness, the very place where those who were disconnected from community were left to make their home. And yet, even he, the one who baptized Jesus(!) isn’t quite sure which way to turn at the point at which we meet him today. He has longed to do so, since the womb! And yet, despite that seemingly innate connection to Emmanuel—God with us—he wonders whether Jesus is the real deal. He sends a message to Jesus—“Are you the one? Or should we keep waiting?” Translation, “should we turn off the line and follow you into the grass? Or keep on plodding, waiting for the coaches of our world to get it together?”

And how does Jesus respond? He sends the disciples, the witnesses of Jesus’ work, to share their stories about all that he Jesus done. Their stories about healing and restoration, about speaking truth to power, even about risen life after death. I’ve often wondered why Jesus sends the disciples. Surely, he could take a moment to visit John, himself, given that the poor guy is in prison largely because of the message Jesus has inspired him to preach.

But, instead, Jesus sends the disciples. And, I think he does so because he knows of the awe and joy that will exude from them as they recount what they have seen. Jesus already knows of what he is capable—he has needed no convincing. But the disciples, they have been where John is (and, as we know, will be again), and the disciples have witnessed what joy awaits those who have begun, through Jesus, to live into the lives that God has long imagined for them. Jesus knows that despite John’s very challenging circumstances, the joy of liberation that he will “catch” from the disciples will nourish him to remain turned toward God.

In all this, we must be careful to distinguish between joy and something with less fortitude…happiness maybe? I don’t have quite the right word, but hopefully you know what I mean. Joy is holy and sometimes quiet, but can be present even in the darkest experiences, while the other is not wise enough to bear witness when things aren’t as they are supposed to be, or as we wish they might be. So, it is joy that is the language of God.

To me, the wisdom of Gaudete Sunday is that if we aren’t sure which way to turn to step into the life that God imagines for us, for all of us, we can follow joy. Joy can be our guide.

I know that many of us are wondering about turning. Some may even be paralyzed by having little idea which way to turn. For those, I encourage us to notice our joy….listen for it in the smallest experiences, in the largest experiences, in our past, in our present…and turn toward it, for it likely heralds the promise of the life God dreams for us.

AMEN.