

Historically, the primary liturgical color of Advent is Purple. This is the color of penitence and fasting as well as the color of royalty - to welcome the Advent of the King. The purple of Advent is also the color of suffering used during Lent and Holy Week. The use of the same color provides an important connection between Jesus' birth and death. The nativity, the Incarnation, cannot be separated from the crucifixion. The purpose of Jesus' coming into the world, of the "Word made flesh" and dwelling among us, was to reveal God and His grace to the world through Jesus' life and teaching, including His suffering, death, and resurrection. To reflect this emphasis, Advent was originally a time of penitence and fasting - much as the Season of Lent - and so it shared the color of Lent.

Over time, however, Advent underwent a shift in emphasis. The third Sunday came to be a time of rejoicing that the fasting was almost over (in some traditions it is called Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin word for "rejoice"). The shift from the purple of the Season to pink or rose for the third Sunday Advent candles was said to reflect this lessening emphasis on penitence as attention turned more toward celebration of the coming of Christ. This was not intended to eliminate any sense of penitence from the Season. With the focus on the Advent or Coming of Jesus, especially in anticipating His Second Advent, there still remained a need for preparation for that coming. Most liturgical churches continued to incorporate confessional prayers into their services that related to a sense of personal unworthiness that needed to be addressed in anticipation and preparation for the Nativity Season.

However, this different emphasis for the season of Advent that had gradually unfolded in the church could not be ignored. The season of Advent had come to be celebrated more in terms of expectation or anticipation in much of the church. The anticipation of the Coming of the Messiah throughout the Old Testament and Judaism had not been in connection with remembrance of sins. Rather, it was in the context of oppression and injustice, the longing for redemption, not from personal guilt and sin, but from the systemic evil of the world expressed in evil empires and tyrants. It was in that sense that all creation was said to "groan for its redemption" as we witnessed the evil that so dominated – and continues to dominate - our world. Advent had become marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, of longing. It was that hope, however faint at times, that God, however distant He sometimes seemed, would bring to the world a King who would rule with truth and justice and righteousness over His people and His creation. There was a longing for God to come and set the world right!

Still, there was a continuing issue here; part of the expectation also anticipated a judgment on sin and a calling of the world to accountability before God. As the prophet Amos warned, the expectation of a coming judgment at the "Day of the Lord" might not be the day of light that we all wanted, because the penetrating light of God's judgment on sin would shine just as brightly on God's people as on everyone else! There was great tension inherent in the expected event.

Enter today, and what is also called "John the Baptist Sunday". The rose colored Advent candle is said here to symbolize the martyrdom of John the Baptist as well as the joy of his message about the nearness of the coming of Christ. John was a prophet, but as the Gospel lesson says, he was more than a prophet. Prophets in the Old Testament were covenantal prosecutors for God. Typically they lived on the fringes of society; they had little in the way of physical possessions or comfort. Their role was not to illustrate the comforts of life, but to disturb the status quo. They were sent when the Lord's people were doing

wrong. They reminded the people that they were breaking God's laws; they summoned witnesses to convict them; they passed judgment for God, and warned of the consequences for disobeying God. **And very significantly**, the prophets of the Old Testament were rarely successful; their efforts and prophecies normally went unheeded by the great majority of people they addressed.

No doubt, John the Baptist was a prophet. He looked and lived the part; he summoned, warned, and judged. He spoke of the need for change. Yet unlike his prophetic predecessors, John the Baptist got the change in behavior he sought. He converted and baptized thousands of people. How did he accomplish this? By addressing the inherent tension in the coming of Christ through calling people to personal transformation based on meeting a special, loving person about to come. He was not demanding change out of a sense of duty, as was characteristic of most of the Old Testament prophets; he was asking people to change out of a sense of love for one who in turn was coming to them out of a sense of love. This transformation message is what made John the Baptist more than a prophet. He declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world" (John 1). The love of God rather than the law of God was about to arrive in person; this was the message that resonated so well with John's converts.

And this is the message I would have you take away on this Rose Sunday. There will be time enough during the rest of our journey through the Church Year to remember our sins. While some church traditions focus on penitence during Advent, and there remains a place for that, the spirit of that expectation from the Old Testament is better captured with a joyous sense of expectancy. There should be a sense of joy and happiness as we await the coming of the King! We should celebrate with gladness the great promise in Advent - knowing that there is also a somber tone as the theme of threat is added to the theme of promise. The spirit of Advent is expressed well in the parable of the bridesmaids who are anxiously awaiting the coming of the Bridegroom (Matt 25:1-13). There is profound joy at the Bridegroom's expected coming. And yet a warning of the need for preparation echoes through the parable.

Because of this presence of dual themes of threat and promise, it is appropriate that Advent be a time of preparation that is marked by prayer. While Lent is characterized by fasting and a spirit of penitence, Advent should be characterized by prayers, prayers of humble devotion and commitment, prayers of submission, prayers for deliverance; prayers from us as those walking in darkness who are awaiting and anticipating a great light.

In many respects, John the Baptist was the prototype for preachers to come, which is perhaps the reason why the set of Propers for this Sunday is placed in this Embertide season. Embertide is a time of special meaning and emphasis for members of the clergy. It is and always has been a time of reflection, evaluation, redirection, and rededication. The Propers for this Advent version are especially pertinent and appropriate; particularly the Collect. Clergy are not to be dressed as others they associate with; many times their behavior may seem off-putting, judgmental, or outright upsetting. But the message that should be emanating from today's clergy is hopefully pure, and simple. Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind; and love thy neighbor as thyself. If we will love by these standards, the God we await, who loves us unswervingly, will take us to live with Him eternally. This is the message that Christ asks His clergy to take to His people at this time of year; God is coming, and we need to make ready for Him. May we ever be ready to receive and respond to such a message.  
*Amen.*

SERMON – THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT –11-DECEMBER - 2016  
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina  
Rev. Sam A. Steere III, Assisting Priest

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