

The Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2020; Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28; Psalm 126

At the beginning of today's service, we watched a three-part video, brought to us by the Bailey, Burke, and Bellerose families. First of all, it is important for you to know that there are families who belong to the Church of the Atonement whose last names do not begin with B! Second, you all know that next week, there is a fourth part to add to the video, so if your family would like to participate, please give me a call!

I am speaking, of course, about the lighting of the Advent wreath. Ava and Luke lit the third candle today, and when I asked them to make their video, I reminded them that today is the day to light the PINK candle. It is also called the ROSE candle, and in some places, today is referred to as Rose Sunday.

There are many traditions about lighting the Advent candles. In some places, the candles are all one color, but each one has a name—peace, hope, joy, and love. In some places the candles are associated with Biblical figures—Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary, and Joseph—and then on Christmas Eve, the candle in the middle is lit to signify the birth of the baby Jesus. In some places, there are simply candles, that are lit—one more each week—the light on the wreath growing at the same time that here in the Northern Hemisphere the natural light is reaching its shortest daily duration.

On this Rose Sunday, I have to tell you, I love all of those traditions! And I am not going to try to convince you that one of them is better than the other. The Advent wreath helps us to mark this waiting time—waiting for Christmas and the birth of the Baby Jesus, but much more than that—we wait in hope and expectation for Christ to come into our broken world and make all things new.

And so I cannot help but make the connection about waiting for the vaccine. This is the strangest Advent any of us have ever known. The world is grieving over the deaths of so many people. 1.6 million people are dead, worldwide, and over 71 million have the disease. It has been a hundred years since there has been a pandemic anything like this one. And yet, tomorrow, they will start shipping a vaccine to the United States.

We are waiting. And we sort of know what we are waiting for. We are beginning to get an idea of how long we will be waiting, maybe? Maybe, we think, by this time next year, we won't have to invite our families to send us a video of lighting the Advent candles, we may just light them with all of us standing in this room together.

But now, we wait. We wait for Christmas in less than two weeks, we wait for the coming of Christ at the end history—and somewhere in between those two spiritual and historical

events, we are waiting for the opportunity to embrace health for ourselves and promote health for everyone we love and get vaccinated.

While we are waiting, we recognize that for some, life is changed forever. People are grieving. And the very thing we usually do to help people out—visiting them, rallying around them, gathering them together—that is the very thing that we cannot do while we wait.

Advent is the season of waiting and expectation and the pandemic has forced us all into the saddest waiting time that I have ever experienced. So bear with me when I tell you a little more about Rose Sunday. Advent wreaths are not the only tradition associated with this time before Christmas.

For over a thousand years, this third Sunday of Advent has been known as “Rejoicing Sunday”—or in the Latin, *Gaudete* Sunday. The tradition is that in addition to lessons from the prophets reminding us of the promises of God to be with us in our sorrow, the service would begin with the singing of a couple of verses from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, ‘Rejoice!’ (Phil. 4:4). We have long since taken up a new tradition, we sing a hymn at the beginning of the service—but even though we no longer enter on chanted lines of Scripture, we remember the joy.

It is the joy that turns the third candle of our Advent wreath from purple to pink. In our opening collect, we begged God to stir up God’s power and come among us—and so we rejoice in the Good News of Jesus, and the heavy purple lightens to rose.

In one way or another, every one of the readings that are appointed for today acknowledge the hard lives that we humans live. Isaiah was talking about the return of Israel from captivity—a whole nation had been dispersed into a foreign land, but God was promising their return. The Psalm sang of an earlier return and likened it to the end of a deathly drought. Our second lesson reminds a people who are grieving the loss of their loved ones that God wants us to be thankful even in sorrow. And then we have the story of John, the baptizer. John comes to the people and reminds them of God’s forgiveness. And more, because with God there is always more, John promises the people that one is standing among them who is greater than he.

That promise—the same promise from our first lesson, and the implied promise in the second lesson—that promise is that we are not alone in our grief, or sin, or sorrow. We human beings are not alone in our hard times. We are not alone in a pandemic. God’s presence is always with us, bearing us up, and nourishing us with love.

There is so much in our world that is just wrong. Pandemic and racial discord and political upheaval here and abroad—and those are just the wrong things we all share. We each have our individual sorrows, too. But John reminds us that there stands among us one who is greater than any of us—and greater than any of our problems. He’s talking about Jesus, of course.

We hear this story about John and Jesus on this Sunday so near to Christmas because of course, Jesus has already been born. We are preparing to celebrate Christmas, in twelve days, but really every day is Christmas.

And in the middle of a pandemic and all the rest that is so wrong, we may stand up and declare that something **is** right. We are not alone. Our God does not live above the world or apart from the world. Our God was born into the world in the small, poor child of Mary. Our God lived among us and knew about a world in which so much was wrong. And when that world turned murderous, our God broke the bonds of death and promised to be with us always.

Always. Even in a global pandemic. We are called to *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*. That is, we are reminded that there is never a moment when God is not with us. Every one of us comes from God. Every gift we have comes from God. We love one another with God's love.

What are we waiting for in this Advent season of waiting and expectation? Are we waiting for Christmas or for the end of the world? Are we waiting for the vaccine? At the beginning of this service, we proclaimed that all of our waiting is *waiting for God*.

And we know that God is always with us. And so, on this Rose Sunday in the middle of a global pandemic, twelve days before Christmas, when there is so much wrong in the world, we can join together and proclaim that God is with us. And there is joy.