

Rejoice! Rejoice! Welcome to Gaudete Sunday, also known as Rejoice Sunday. It's always a surprise to see that pink candle flickering among all the purple, or a pink stole aside to our purple altar dressings. It can catch us off guard. Up to now, Advent has been inviting us to slow down, to wait, to pay attention, and to be honest about our longing, and the parts of life that are still unfinished. Then, right in the middle of it all, the Church calls out, **"OK people, now we REJOICE."**

Not later. Not when everything is settled. Not when the waiting is over. **But right now.**

Folks, this tells us something important. It says that Christian joy isn't a reward for getting through hard times, and it's not something we earn once we have everything figured out. Instead, we are invited into joy right in the middle of our waiting. *That matters*, because most of us didn't come here today with simple, tidy lives. We carry all sorts of things—gratitude mixed with grief, hope mixed with worry, joy we hold gently, and concerns we can't quite shake. For some, this season feels tender and sweet. For others, it feels heavy. And for many, it's a bit of both. So, if today's call to rejoice is going to be real for us, it has to be a kind of joy that can live in a complicated place.

That's why I think today's readings fit together so well. They aren't just three separate messages. They are really one conversation across time. Together, they invite us to rejoice honestly, being present to what's happening around and inside us, and to look for God's presence in the places where life is quietly being restored.

Isaiah starts by offering us an image: *"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom."* And while Isaiah doesn't try to gaslight us, he reminds us that difficulty isn't the whole story. It's true, the desert doesn't go away. Yes, the land is still dry. And yet, even there, signs of life appear. Something starts to grow. God's future can break in, even (and frankly always) where we least expect it.

James takes that vision of promise and brings it into everyday life. He writes to people who are tired of waiting and have been holding on for a long time. *"Be patient, beloved," he says. "Strengthen your hearts."* This isn't about forcing ourselves to be cheerful. It's about the kind of patience that keeps showing up, like a farmer who keeps tending the soil even when nothing seems to be happening. Isaiah gives us the vision, and James reminds us how to live while we wait for it.

But waiting can be hard, and that's the wilderness where John the Baptist finds himself today.

John was the bold, confident prophet who once knew exactly what to say, and didn't mince words doing it. He did his job, prepared the way, baptized Jesus, and pointed to him, proclaiming, *"Here he is. This is the One."* But now John is in prison, cut off and powerless. From that place of pain and isolation, he sends a deeply honest question: *"Are you really the one, or should we keep waiting?"*

This isn't doubt as rebellion or disbelief. For John, this is faith under strain. It's what trust sounds like when the story hasn't gone the way we expected, when we are worn down, afraid, and unsure of what comes next. It's faith that hasn't given up, even when it's exhausted.

What matters most here is how Jesus responds. He doesn't scold John or tell him to believe harder. And he doesn't argue his case. Jesus just points to what's happening around them: people are being healed, lives are being restored, and the poor are hearing good news.

He simply tells John's friends, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see."* Be witnesses to where **you** see light is breaking through.

This is where we see Isaiah, James, and John come together. Isaiah says the wilderness will bloom. James tells us to keep our hearts open while we wait. Jesus says we'll know God is at work by noticing where healing is happening right now.

That feels especially important for us today. We live in a world where every day brings another story that makes us shake our heads or hold our breath. It's easy to wonder if God has stepped back.

But Jesus gently changes the question for us. Instead of asking if everything is OK, he asks us to notice just where we are looking and to who it is that has our attention. Not at the centers of power or the loudest voices, but at the margins—at the quiet places where people are cared for, where dignity is restored, and where someone is finally seen.

Not in the halls of power, but out where ordinary lives are lived in community. Rachel Held Evans once wrote, *"The gospel is not good news for those who already have everything they want. It is good news for the poor, the broken, the displaced, and the weary."* That's important for us to remember, especially when people are losing access to healthcare and others are being taken from their homes and communities in ways we may have not experienced ourselves yet.

Gaudete joy doesn't ask us to look away from these realities. It asks us to face them honestly, with open eyes and tender hearts. And it asks us to remember that prayer isn't just a practice we do in private behind closed doors. It is our prayerful relationship with our Creator that shapes us as disciples and prepares us to go out as do the work of God's Kin-dom.

Jesus shows us how to live in the middle of things. He shows us how we can hold two truths at once, even when they seem to pull us in different directions.

We can rejoice *and* grieve.

We can hold hope *and* tell the truth about what hurts our communities and our neighbors.

We can trust that God is near, *even while the story is still unfinished.*

This is the kind of joy many of us need—not forced cheerfulness, not a joy that ignores pain, but a joy that steadies us and helps us keep going.

The truth is, if we wait until the world is fully healed before we let ourselves rejoice, we'll be waiting forever. But if our joy is rooted in God's nearness here and now, in the middle of an unfinished story, then joy becomes an act of trust. It also becomes a quiet form of resistance—a refusal to let despair have the last word.

Moments of healing, courage, and kindness **are** holy. They are Christ's call to *Gaudete*. They are like the pink candle—not erasing the darkness but reminding us it isn't the whole story. We aren't the only ones watching for light. In this season, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Diwali also show us that light keeps appearing, even when the world feels fragile. We don't necessarily claim those stories as our own, but we can see in them a shared longing and hope, as we rejoice with them. God reveals Godself in many ways, and God's light and truth are never limited to one path. And, we can trust that God is already at work in and around us, even when the story isn't finished yet.

So maybe our Advent practice this week is simple: to look with open and honest eyes, to notice where light is breaking through, and to tell what we see.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, you meet us in the midst of our waiting. Give us eyes to see where your light is already breaking through, and hearts strong enough to remain open when the way forward is not yet clear. In this season of Advent, teach us to rejoice anyway, trusting that you are near and that your light does not fail. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.