

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on December 14, 2025

Isaiah 35:1-10 / Psalm 146:4-9 / James 5:7-10 / Matthew 11:2-11

We thank You, God, for the wilderness.

Wilderness is our place.

As we wait for the land of promise,

teach us the ways of new living, lead us to where we hear Your word most clearly,

renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives,

prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ's coming

when the desert will sing and the wilderness will blossom as the rose. Amen.

Today is Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* means *rejoice* and comes from the antiphon *Rejoice in the Lord always*. The name and lighting the rose candle offers breather, a lightening of the tone of the Advent observance, and an opportunity to express the joy of the anticipation of the Coming of the Messiah that we have during Advent. Though, in today's Gospel, there clearly is no rejoicing for John!

Today is a bad day for John the Baptist. He is in prison for publicly rebuking Herod for taking his brother's wife as his own. He has heard about all the amazing things that Jesus has done, but wants to make sure that Jesus is The One, because the Messiah – as prophesied by Isaiah – was certainly coming to cure people and to give relief to the afflicted, but also to set the prisoners free. And here is John the Baptist *still in prison!* Not a day of rejoicing for him!

Why wouldn't the Messiah set this captive free? It's really tough when your expectations of life-changing events don't match what the life-changing event has to offer. And I'll share a story about the mismatch of expectations vs. reality.

Many of you know that I spent 3 Christmases as Chaplain on cruise ships. You go on a Christmas Cruise to have a really fun time in the sun and to overindulge. And that was certainly going on. But from the first time I stood at the bar by the pool trying to make iced tea from a mug of hot tea and as much ice as the bewildered

bartender would give me, my job became apparent: To help people through the mismatch of emotional expectations they had regarding their Christmas Cruise.

A couple of times a day – particularly at any of the bars on the ship – the person next to me waiting for their drink would strike up a conversation which eventually led to something like this:

The kids decided to get Mum this cruise for Christmas because Dad died earlier this year, and we just wanted to get away from all the pain.

Christmas is always a difficult time with family and all the pressure with the commercialization, I just thought I would get away.

I had a really bad break-up and I just didn't want to be around all the memories that Christmas brings up.

There was a lot of pain and sorrow on those ships that was out of sync with why the passengers were there. When I experienced this on the first cruise, I decided to host a Blue Christmas Service. The two cruises on which I offered this, a couple of dozen passengers and crew showed up. And together we lifted up our sorrows to God.

Those escaping Christmas to escape their pain and grief realized fairly quickly upon embarking the ship that pain and grief are not geographical, and that it's the worst place to try and hide from the glitziness of Christmas. Each day on a Christmas Cruise, as you get closer to Christmas Eve, more and more decorations appear, more Christmas music is played and the Cruise Director's staff get more and more enthusiastic about getting passengers to participate in their Christmas fun! And there is no place to go! The Blue Christmas Service was their escape!

Their "Messiah" was to be the cruise, that would set them free from their captivity of pain and grief. But the cruise didn't do that for them, because they

had a misunderstanding of what the “Messiah” or the cruise is for. And John the Baptist is sort of in that place with Jesus.

The Messiah is supposed to grant release to the captives, but I’m still here!

It didn’t work out for John the Baptist because Jesus was working within the political framework of His time. There was no sort of Divine machinations that could have gotten John the Baptist released from prison.

John the Baptist in prison when the liberator is not far away is our cue to look for those for whom December and the run-up to Christmas is a difficult time of year.

Because our commercialist society has transformed Christmas into something that doesn’t match the expectations of scripture, there is a mismatch between what December-mas *is* and what the Incarnation *brings*. In the December *out there*, every day is Gaudete, every day is rejoicing. The December *in here* recognizes the challenges that come with the anticipation of something greater than we can imagine.

So, this is an opportunity to help realign expectations for those still in the prison of their grief. It’s a time to offer pastoral support and point toward what Christmas is *really* about rather than forcing joy on others. It’s Advent – the time when we prepare and wait ... and live in hope.

So, I implore you to think about who in your life is feeling the pain and grief more acutely this month? Who needs help with the Love of God through the Incarnation of Jesus to come into focus? Who would welcome a reminder that the wait ends in something wonderful? Who is not here? Who is hurting? With whom can we spend these next 10 days comforting and reminding that Jesus bore their griefs to the point that they will join us on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and know and feel that love?

When someone is feeling the pain and grief more acutely at this time of year, it is difficult for them to comprehend that someone of pure good is coming so that:

*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news
brought to them.*

Now...I'm not advocating some hardcore proselyting to your grieving friends! But providing space and time with them, listening to their pain and grief, and *being* the Love of Jesus in that moment is helping them out of the wilderness. Perhaps their tongues won't be singing for joy, but perhaps they will feel that *the Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger.*

It's really tough when expectations don't match what is really happening. John the Baptist sits in prison with disbelief!

*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?
The Messiah is supposed to grant release to the captives, but I'm still
here!*

And that is true of our contemporary Advent Season. What is happening out there is unbridled Gaudete and conspicuous consumption. What is happening inside any particular person may be sadness or grief. *We know* that the Incarnation made a huge difference and Jesus *does bring tidings of comfort and joy*. But that is difficult for some to see. So, seek them out over these next 10 days. Spend these next 10 days accompanying another so that they can get to a place of Gaudete, so that they can get to a place to *rejoice in the Lord always!*

We are instrumental in the work that scripture tells us that the Messiah will bring. To those for whom December is a time of pain and grief, bring to them the comfort and peace of Christ so that at His coming they may receive and know the JOY!