Homily for Advent 3, Dec. 13th, 2020

S. Stephen’s, Providence

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy Gaudete Sunday.

On this Third Sunday of Advent,

you will notice we’ve had a bit of a costume change,

as we’ve temporarily exchanged our Advent blue

for a bit of Rose or pink color.

Many of you know already the tradition behind this,

but if you don’t, this Sunday was traditionally a day

when the somberness and severity of the penitential season

were lifted for a moment –

a bit of a reprieve, if you will –

to remind the faithful of the feast day which lay ahead of them.

The opening words of the Introit and the Epistle reading

exhorted them to “Rejoice” – the Latin word being “Gaudete.”

So rejoice, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord always.

Christmas is indeed coming, but not yet.

As you will have noticed in our readings today,

there is no hint or mention of the Holy Family or the babe at Bethlehem.

John the Baptist still holds center stage.

Our Scripture readings and our liturgical calendar do us a great service this morning.

They will not let us slip into sentimentality or nostalgia,

which I find very easy to do this time of year.

In fact, I put out all my Christmas decorations this past week,

including a tree on Friday,

complete with lights and ornaments.

I have mistletoe hung, and cherished Christmas heirlooms out around the house.

As I decorated the tree, I played holiday music,

the smell of cinnamon and cloves hanging heavy in the air,

as mulled cider simmered away on the stove.

You can just hear Nat King Cole singing “Chestnuts roasting over an open fire,”

and Bing Crosby’s “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” can’t you?

It’s pretty great – and on some level,

it is meet and right, especially in this year in which we’ve faced so much loss,

and experienced so much disruption.

We naturally turn to things that provide comfort and familiarity.

The warm glow of my Christmas tree

makes me feel like a child again,

when magic seemed to fill every particle of the air this time of year,

and I would lay on the floor and look up through the tree at all the lights.

While we want to look backward for comfort and happy memories, however,

our liturgy and our readings will not let us.

Advent continually points us forward into a yet unrealized future.

There is something yet to be done,

something yet to hope for,

and something yet to be accomplished.

That great collect we prayed earlier,

“Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us,”

would suggest that all is not right – all is not well – all is not bright and calm.

Because we are yet sorely hindered by our sins, we prayed,

we still need our God to come and speedily deliver us.

In what is undoubtedly the earliest part of the New Testament to be written,

Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians,

we get a glimpse at how the earliest Christians thought and prayed.

They believed Jesus’s return was imminent.

They were to remain alert and watchful – those buzzwords of the Advent season.

They were to rejoice always and continually give thanks in all circumstances.

There were to hold fast to that which was good, and to abstain from every evil,

that they might be found blameless at the day of the Lord’s coming.

They are assured that the one who calls them is faithful,

and that he will provide for all these things.

We are still waiting.

We are, along with billions of other souls down the centuries,

in that great time of faithfulness

between Christ’s first advent and his final advent.

Paul’s admonishments and advice to the Thessalonians are good advice for us as well.

Hold fast to that which is good, and abstain from evil.

Easy enough, right?

But he also says, “Do not quench the Spirit,”

and “Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything.”

Apparently, there was a spirit or tradition of prophecy alive and well –

something we do not think about often today.

And if there were prophets among us even now,

what would they look and act like? and how would we know them?

Paul suggests the Thessalonians faced similar questions when he advises them

“to test everything.”

In our Gospel reading this morning,

we encounter a prophet who is tested repeatedly

and passes the test every time with flying colors.

Ironically, John the Baptist does this by refusing to say anything about himself.

He says is not the prophet – he is not Elijah – he is not the Messiah.

And when he finally does say something in the affirmative,

it is a quotation of Isaiah –

that other prophetic voice we encounter so much in Advent.

John is simply faithful –

he is not out for his own glory or reward –

he is simply faithful to the call of God,

and is acting upon it.

He will only point toward Jesus – the Messiah who was coming.

And therein lies the way in which we know the truthfulness of prophetic words –

that is how we follow Paul’s advice to “test everything” –

to consider thoughtfully “is this pointing toward God?

or is it pointing towards something else?”

The Church has tended to want to make John the Baptist

a kind of wild, eccentric, and loud figure.

A disrupter of sorts.

As a result, however, I find that many clergy and many church leaders

tend to think they’re being “prophetic” whenever they do something unpopular,

controversial, or unorthodox.

They will even do the one thing a true prophet never does,

which is ascribe the prophetic nature to what they are doing.

In reality, all they are doing is being obnoxious, controversial, and unorthodox.

Unfortunately, few of those clergy people will hear what I just said –

but I’ve said it anyway.

We are, however, reminded this morning

that we are all called to be prophetic like John,

inasmuch as that he is simply being faithful to God’s call,

living out his faithfulness,

and pointing not towards himself,

but always toward Christ in all that he does.

Is that not the call of every Christian?

To be faithful to God,

to live out that faithfulness,

and to point towards Christ in all that we do?

I would certainly say it is.

As Moses cried,

“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets,

and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:29)

Yes, we are all called to be prophets –

but that also means being a people who resist settling comfortably into nostalgia,

or dreaming only of a better past.

The prophets are ones who constantly look forward,

and imagine a better future.

Yes, I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know –

but frankly, as a Christian,

I’d rather always imagine and prepare for an even better Christmas –

hoping and believing that Christ might be manifested ever more and more so,

along with the love, light, and joy that he brings.

So as we prepare for Christmas, let us be an Advent people –

a people who listen for the Lord’s voice, and watch for signs of his coming;

a people who dream of a world in which God’s will for all people

is realized and enacted.

Like the Thessalonians, may we be perched on the edge,

living in this world fully,

rejoicing and giving thanks despite whatever adversities come our way,

while looking toward the heavens

and living as if Christ might return any moment.

As I urge all of us to remain faithful –

faithful to God, faithful to each other, and faithful towards all people –

remember Paul’s words to the Thessalonians:

the one who calls you is faithful.

We are able to remain faithful in our devotion and love and witness,

because of God’s faithfulness towards us.

That, my friends, is something indeed worth rejoicing over on this Gaudete Sunday.

So rejoice – rejoice in the Lord always.

Amen.