

## **Don't confuse the signpost for the destination.**

Sermon Advent 3 Year B – Dec. 17, 2023

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Here's the first rule of Advent travel: do not confuse the signpost for the destination.

This is the lesson that the priests and Levites learn when they go out to the Jordan River to interrogate that strange man baptizing people there.

These priests and Levites and the Pharisees who sent them knew a purification ritual when they saw one. As a sect they were particularly concerned with making sure that all Jews met priestly standards for holiness. This stranger was encroaching on their territory. If he wasn't the messiah himself, then he'd better go back where he came from.

We're not asking for ourselves mind you, but for a friend, they say to John the Baptist. But we'd like to know:

Are you the Messiah whom Isaiah foretells?

*No.*

How about Elijah, who is to return and announce the coming of the Messiah?

*Not that I know of.*

The messianic prophet mentioned in Deuteronomy?

*Unlikely.*

Then who are you? Why do you baptize if you're not any of these?

And John essentially says: Look. I'm not the destination. I'm just the sign post – the voice crying out, this way please. The one that points to where you really should be looking – to that location where God and humanity meet. This time it's a person not a place. And by the way, he's already among you.

And why does John baptize? Perhaps in the case of the priests and the Levites, it's so that they will come to him, and ask him that question. And he can tell them about the one they really should be seeking. John's baptism is the signpost not the destination.

Perhaps too late, the priests and Levites realize that they are in the hands of a biblical prophet. John is much like the unnamed prophet in the passage from Isaiah today – the one who has been sent to bring good news to the people who have returned from exile in Babylon only to find their city in ruins and a freedom that isn't as free as they hoped.

Like John, this prophet is a signpost pointing to the nearness of God – and here are the signs: Your oppression will end. Your broken hearts will be healed, and your sorrow will lift. Your prison doors will swing open. Your ruined city will be repaired. Step this way.

And even these reversals are not ends in themselves, but indicators that God is among them. On the other side of the forgiveness and the comfort and the restoration is a new life altogether – where God and humanity are not separated. That’s God’s real agenda, and it always has been.

Prophets point out that God is among us. They are instruments of the reversals that reveal the presence of God, especially in times when it seems like other gods are winning.

Times like these. And as Christians, we are made for these times.

We, this assembly, this church, have a very particular role at this time. We might like to think we’re the searchers, but really we’re the signposts. Because we don’t have to go out hunting for Jesus, asking strangers if they are the messiah. We know who he is and where he is and how to find him. It’s in our sacred stories, and our songs, and our Eucharists, and the prayers of our Prayer Book and the people we’ll chat with over coffee. Our regular, committed gathering in the name of Christ immerses us in the presence of God.

But we aren’t called to live the life of faith for our own personal spiritual health and growth. Our own wellbeing and comfort and joy is not the destination of our religious life. But it is the sign. And that sign points to a God that does not want to be separated from us.

Being an effective signpost on the Advent Road requires a subtle change of perspective, especially in these self-absorbing times. It requires us to shift from our tendency to turn inward to check if God still dwells there, to a practice of turning outward to see who else is looking for God. Who needs Christ? Who is stumbling in the dark? Who is lost?

We must ask ourselves as church, who is searching for deliverance in our circle of influence today? The prophet in Isaiah gives us a good starter list – those who are oppressed by other people, who are brokenhearted and mourning, those held captive by any number of false gods and addictions. Those whose cities are crushed, whose lives are not what they hoped they would be.

We know them when we see them. The question is, do they know Christ when they see us?

When they look to us, what do they see?

On this third week of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, let them see our joy. Because joy – that deep grounded appreciation for what is truly good about life – can be as strange and surprising in these darkening days as a wild man performing unauthorized baptisms in the muddy Jordan River.

This is what the pink candle of the third week of Advent points to: the call to rejoice because the waiting and anticipation of Advent is nearly done. God is very near. And that’s Good News. Gaudete is Latin for Rejoice!

The Joy of Gaudete Sunday is very different from holiday cheer, from the forced happiness of the sappy tunes we’ve been hearing since Halloween, from the constant blink of artificial lights. But even in all this forced merriness, Joy stands out as something distinct. It is what illuminates us signposts. It’s what draws people near.

[Henry Nowen writes](#) that “Whatever we may think or say about God, when we are not joyful, our thoughts and words cannot bear fruit.”<sup>1</sup>

And he goes on to say that “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing — sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death — can take that love away.”

I truly believe that if we can get our bearings on our Joy and on its source, we’ll know where to point when people come looking for the Christ. I also know that we can’t just flip Joy on like a switch -- that if you are not feeling particularly happy or hopeful or seasonal, radiating joy can seem like a pretty tall order.

So here is a practice to jump start joy: begin by calling to mind what you are grateful for. Spend a little time just locating and re-experiencing that for which you continue to be thankful, that which you cherish and appreciate. Make sure to place among those blessings the immense privileges of life and love and the relationships that make those things possible. It’s a nice practice to do in front of your Advent wreath, as you light the rose candle of this third Sunday.

Gratitude has its own special powers for orienting us as Advent signposts. Joanna Macy names gratitude as the “originating impulse of all great spiritual and religious traditions” and it’s the place where she locates the start of the life practice that she calls the Work that Reconnects. Gratitude grounds us, calms us and puts us in a place of receptivity and mutuality. Because it makes us aware of the wonder of this present moment, gratitude does not depend on whether we “like where we are at or what we are facing” Macy says. And that sounds a lot like Henri Nowen’s take on Joy.

And finally gratitude is deliciously subversive in a social and political climate that keeps insisting that we have yet to purchase all that we really need. Gratitude says I’m content with what I have, thank you very much. Where you have gratitude, Joy is not far behind.

So on this third Sunday of Advent, as we are called to orient ourselves as signposts that point to the Kingdom of God – I suggest we start gently, by naming our gratitude, and locating our joy. From there we can follow it to that place where God meets us and loves us without conditions.

That way when we encounter someone who is lost, we can point them along the way that God has set them on.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/excerpts/view/14116> From the Heart of Henry Nowen, His Words of Blessing.