

Sermon for Sunday, December 17, 2017 – "Rejoice: Your Light Has Come"

Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus, the true light.

Three of our scriptures for today focus on joy, on rejoicing. And God knows we need some joy - not holiday cheer, not forced, pretend happiness, but real joy. Rejoicing helps us to defy the power of evil so that it does not define or defeat us. Rejoicing helps us to focus on what we love, rather than on all that is wrong. Rejoicing helps us witness to the light that shines day and night, even when it is hidden.

Someone who seeks to rejoice always and who, by his witness, helps me to rejoice is Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest famous for his gang intervention programs in Los Angeles. He's the founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries which employs former gang members. In a recent interview, Fr. Boyle shared a story about one of these "homies", as they call themselves, who asked him for a blessing. He recalls, "I have a homie named Louie, who's just turned 18, and he's kind of a difficult kid. He's exasperating, and he's whiny. And he works for me, although 'work' may be too strong a verb.

So, this kid, Louie, I'm talking to him and he's complaining about something. And finally, at the end of it, he says, "Hey, G, give me a bless, yeah?" (Which apparently is the way all these guys ask Fr. Boyle to bless them.) I said, "Sure." So, he comes around to my side of the desk, he knows the drill, and he bows his head and I put my hands on his shoulder. Well, his birthday had been two days before, so it gave me an opportunity to say something to him. And I said, "You know, Louie, I'm proud to know you and my life is richer because you came into it. When you were born, the world became a better place. And I'm proud to call you my son, even though — and I don't know why I decided to add this part — at times, you can really be a huge pain." And he looks up and he smiles. And he says, "The feeling's mutual."

Fr. Boyle reflects on this, "You want people to recognize the truth of who they are: that they're exactly what God had in mind when God made them ... we're all called to be enlightened witnesses: people who, through kindness and tenderness and focused attention of love, return people to themselves. And in the process, you're returned to yourself. Maybe I returned Louie to himself," Fr. Boyle says, "But there is no doubt that he returned me to myself."

[*\(Transcript from interview with Fr. Greg Boyle on radio program On Being with Krista Tippett\).*](#)

In our Gospel reading for today, John serves as that kind of enlightened witness - a witness who seeks to return people to themselves and to the light.

John knows the truth of who he is. He knows that he's not the long-awaited Messiah, not Elijah returned from the dead, not the prophet, not the light. He is a witness, a voice crying out in the wilderness testifying to the true light. John recognizes the truth of who he is because he has been enlightened by the true light. When he was just a baby in his mother's womb, he leapt for joy when Mary entered the room,

pregnant with the baby Jesus. Even then, John knew he was in the presence of the true light. Even then, he bore witness - leaping for joy.

As an enlightened witness, John calls God's people to repent, to prepare themselves for the coming of their Savior. He tells people the truth about their lives, hoping to return them to themselves and to their God, hoping that they too will become enlightened witnesses. John never forgets who he is. He is not the light. He is a witness to the light. So, it is for us. We are not the light but we are called to be enlightened witnesses. We're called to witness to the light, even when it is hidden.

Witnesses watch, listen and pay attention so that they can testify to what they've seen and heard. We are called to pay attention to the light - to look, expectantly, for places and people where the light is at work, to recognize the light within others and around us. We're called to notice the light, name the light, and rejoice in that light. The light that is the Word made flesh, the light that is Jesus the Christ is bringing good news to the oppressed, is binding up the brokenhearted, is comforting all who mourn. The light is replacing our faint spirit with a mantle of praise. The light is creating joy.

Theologian Henri Nouwen describes the difference between joy and happiness: "While happiness is dependent on external conditions, 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."

So, you enlightened witnesses, receive a blessing on this day of joy, "I'm proud to know you and my life is richer because you came into it. When you were born, the world became a better place." You may not feel like it most days, but the light of Christ is replacing your faint spirit with a mantle of praise. You've sowed with tears, but you will reap with songs of joy.

Rejoice and bear witness to this light.

Amen.