
‘Stir Us Up’—So We May Rejoice in Restoration

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith

Advent 3 – Year B

Preached at St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church, Dahlonega, Georgia

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Paraphrase, Psalm 19:14)

Thank you, St. Elizabeth's, for welcoming me and my family so warmly today! And thanks be to God for welcoming us all into beloved community with each other.

This past Wednesday, as I was beginning to focus on my message for us today, I suddenly realized that I had missed our office holiday party just a few hours earlier. And I don't mind telling you that I'm still disappointed about it! The reasons are personal and professional. You've invited me to join you here today as a priest of the church, for which I'm honored and grateful. My full-time employment, however, is as an Emory University professor.

One reason I'm still chagrined about missing the office party is that we get so few occasions as faculty colleagues to enjoy congeniality: being convivial and relaxing with one another, and with our staff and students. Every opportunity feels precious, since most of our time is so intensely focused on performance issues in and out of classes. Well, that's the professional reason for my dismay.

I have a personal reason for my disappointment, however. I'm disappointed that I seem to be so isolated from my colleagues and staff that I don't remember such times of conviviality, and that I don't get reminded of them so that I won't forget. There must have been email about that party, of course; although I actually searched and couldn't find it. But are we colleagues so busy or disconnected from one another that we don't routinely check in with one another; saying things like, "Looking forward to seeing you at the office party tomorrow!" or calling each other when we notice someone's absence or 'txt-ing' them a message like, "Missing you at the party! Are you coming?"

I was still having those miserable feelings from last Wednesday when I woke up the very next day on Thursday and read our morning devotional in *Forward Day by Day* for that morning. How many of us here today read that Episcopal Church booklet, or the online posting for everyday of the year? ... Oh great; I see I'm in good company here! Well, if you also read the comments you'll sometimes see that I post comments on occasion also, and my name and profile picture will identify me of course. But on that particular morning I was so distressed that I could not respond; I just say and absorbed the meditation for that day. And this is what it said:

Advent is more than a winter party.

Well, it said more than that of course! But that's what got my attention, as you can appreciate; and it was just what I needed to hear. "Advent is more than a winter party." Oh yeah, I remembered, "Advent!" Hmm... that's what's going on here, I began to realize. And our author for this month, Robert Slocum—a priest now living and teaching in Kentucky where I have also lived and taught, and in fact where I was confirmed in our Episcopal Church—brother Slocum proceeds in his meditation to be quite explicit about what's going on this time of year. He writes:

It's easy to go through life expecting everything on our schedule. We have things to do, places to go, and not enough time. We're in a hurry and impatient. We can be so busy...

We need to let go of our frantic agendas. We can breathe and pay attention to the gentle movement of the Spirit in our hearts. Wait for our Lord who may not follow our timetables. Listen for God who may come to us in a whisper. We can accept the invitation to “be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.”

It’s especially hard to wait and be still during Advent. We’re surrounded by people who are excited, stressed, or even sad because of the holidays. Stores are selling, *friends are partying* [emphasis mine], and there are many expectations to fulfill ...

And that’s where he adds the punchline for me: “But for us, this Advent is more than a winter party.” ‘More than a winter party,’ he proclaims! And then concludes:

Our Maker and Redeemer is coming into the world. We can be still and wait patiently for him. ([Forward Day by Day](#); Cincinnati, OH: Forward Movement pub., Nov., Dec., 2014, Jan., 2015; Thursday, Dec. 11)

Oh well, there it was: my truth for that day! As the bumper sticker says—maybe you’ve seen it on a car in front of you —“Synchronicity happens.” Or as a friend of mine says, “ADGE:” that’s her slightly profane acronym whenever something happens that she calls, “Another Darn Growth Experience.” A-D-G-E—*adge!* we could say; both humorously and of course also exasperated as if we’re also saying, “Here we go again!”

Yes, here we go again, church friends! It’s the thick of Advent, and we’re really in for it now. Forgetting things, freaking out over other things, fretting or fuming over still other things—we’re really in it now. And that’s why we have our collect appointed for this Third Sunday of Advent. It’s also a cute Episcopal Church tradition to name this third Sunday in Advent after the first word in our collect; our opening prayer for the day: “Stir up.”

Yes, it’s *Stir-up Sunday* once again, and here is how our collect invites us to pray on this day:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us ... ([Collect for the 3rd Sunday of Advent](#); *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979; p. 212)

And now right here, church friends, right here we come upon a second theme for this Stir-up Sunday, 2014. “Our mouth was filled with laughter,” our Psalm exults today like Mary proclaiming in the Magnificat, “and our tongue with shouts of joy.”

[For] the LORD has done great things for us, and we *rejoiced*.

I had almost left out that theme of rejoicing among us here today. But my mother—with whom I’m blessed to be in ministry—Dr. Josephine just happened to remind us about it yesterday. It was during our house church worship service that she lit that third candle on our Advent wreath—the third candle for this Third Sunday of Advent—and as she lit it she reminded us that it represents the theme of joy and rejoicing. Yes, and while the other candles on the wreath have the color of purple—passion purple to show that Advent is a penitential season, a ‘little Lent’ as we say—today’s third candle is rose colored to show that we also take ‘time-out’ for a day of refreshment and restoration on this third Sunday of Advent.

In fact in the tradition of the medieval church we are commanded to rejoice today: *Gaudete* is the Latin word for the imperative form that commands us to “Rejoice!” One of the candles surrounding the Christ Candle in the Advent wreath is rose coloured, for *Gaudete Sunday* or *Joy Sunday*, the beginning of the third week in Advent. The parament next to this rose coloured candle has the word Joy printed on it. (From [Wikipedia](#))

So this Third Sunday of Advent bears not one but *two* additional names in church tradition: not only ‘Stir up Sunday’ but also ‘Gaudete Sunday!’ And since other churches do not share our prayerbook Collect for today, this Sunday is better known throughout the more traditional churches by that ‘Gaudete’ theme. But in this particular season of Advent, 2014, one of our Roman Catholic commentators has acknowledged a difficulty we face in rejoicing:

This Gaudete Sunday, rejoice despite the heartbreak all around us.

We are commanded to rejoice. Against the backdrop of heartbreaking news out of cities like Ferguson, Mo., and

New York this Advent, I don't really feel like rejoicing. [But] I probably need that sort of urgency [of being commanded to rejoice]. Of course, there are sad headlines every Gaudete Sunday, and every other day. Our celebration this week (and at Christmas) is a countercultural declaration that even in sadness, we rejoice because our hope is in the one who is stronger than death. (Mike Jordan Laskey, Dec. 11, 2014; [National Catholic Reporter Online](#))

Now right here, with this reminder of another march on Washington this very weekend (to protest the chronic police killings of African American men and boys)—right here we also need to be reminded of our national unity. And my best counsel for such a reminder is the intervention of a little levity—a little light-hearted humor and comic relief. And we need such levity both spiritually and politically. Let me tell you why. It's because we are actually one people here today—one people of the same citizenship, and, in this particular place, one people of the same baptism. As President Lincoln famously said—the president who staked his entire legacy on 'preserving the Union' and preserving our unity—"both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God."

But when we are confronted with tough and divisive political realities we are likely to forget that unity—or to feel that it is being undermined, called into question, assailed or denied. And that's precisely where humor or levity can help us, because good humor and good catharsis can replace feelings of disunity and distress with equally compelling feelings of renewed unity and reaffirmed solidarity. That is true especially if we can't find a political remedy for our disunity, which is too often the case.

But we can rediscover, reclaim, or restore our fragile-seeming unity by the convivial remedy of all of us laughing together. For example, this is the second Sunday in a row that we have encountered John the Baptist in our gospel readings. Last Sunday, you may recall, we were introduced to John as a prophet 'clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and eating locusts (or grasshoppers) with wild honey.' He was also, we may recall, haranguing people about repenting of their sins (Mark 1:6, 4). So he's not the most likely candidate for a little sermon humor today! If fact I searched the internet of John the Baptist humor and I can tell you: 'ain't nobody' out there having a lot of fun joking about John the Baptist!

However I did come across this desperate effort to lighten things up for John: 'What does John the Baptist have in common with ... say, Billy the Kid; or with Xena the Warrior Princess? Now before you get too worked up let me offer the following variations which you'll likely find on the internet:

What does John the Baptist has in common with Kermit the Frog or Winnie the Pooh? Their middle names, of course!

John *the* Baptist: Winnie *the* Pooh, Kermit *the* Frog, Billie *the* Kid, and Xena *the* Warrior Princess. Everybody got it now? Well, that's about the best we can do in polite company here today with ole John the Baptist!

But here, Christian friends, while we get to laugh a little at our crusty old prophet, John, we also get to petition the throne of God with these scriptures appointed for today:

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Well there it is, holy friends and fellow citizens: that's what we're waiting for in this Advent season 2014, isn't it?

For "righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations;" and 'to cover us with a robe of righteousness,' so that we're 'acknowledged as a people whom the Lord has blessed'—that's what we're waiting for this Advent, right?

And we're waiting being known as a people who "build up the ancient ruins ... raise up the former devastations ... repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations;" as a people who are "oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory"—that's what we're really waiting for this Advent, aren't we really?

If we could become that kind of people, then would the prophecy be fulfilled that Isaiah announces to us today. Yes, and even our Psalm appointed for today describes what that fulfillment would be like. Psalm 126 begins:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream ...

Aren't we dreaming of that kind of Christmas during this Advent season, 2014? Don't we share the dream-vision of a prophet of our own time and region who also said, "I have a dream" (The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; "I Have A Dream;" March on Washington, 1963)

Now that word "restored" is yet another key prophetic word highlighted in our scriptures today. It's a capstone word for our time and our people, I declare; and a capstone word for the rest of the world and throughout this millennium, I dare prophesy. Indeed the words "restoration" and "restorative justice" are becoming increasingly popular nowadays in literature and in movements across the globe. And in our prophecy in Isaiah today we hear the verse, "For I the LORD love justice" (Isaiah 61.8). But listen to how our Psalm puts it:

When the LORD *restored* the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.
Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the [wilderness] . . .
—Psalm 126.1-5

So right here, saints of the church and saints-in-training, right here we come upon our final theme for this Stir-up and Gaudete Sunday, 2014: *restoration!* "Restore us, O Lord God of hosts," the Psalmist implores in yet another Psalm (Ps. 80.18):

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.

There we have it! Our summary themes of Advent-waiting as we await the light of God's salvation in the face of our coming Messiah—await the light of the Christ child, await the light of our Prince of Peace. And here we pray all three themes of our Third Sunday of Advent today:

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great power come among us to 'stir us up,'
so that we may be ***restored*** to justice, unity and community;
so we may ***rejoice*** with the favor you have for your people. †

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

† Remember [us], O LORD,
with the favor you have for your people,
and visit [us] with your saving help;
That [we] may see the prosperity of your elect
and be glad with the gladness of your people,
that [we] may glory with your inheritance.
Psalm 106.4-5; translation: *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 742; www.bcponline.org