

The third candle we light in Advent is pink. I've heard some call it the Mary candle for Mary's Sunday—but that is NEXT week. So then, what IS this pink candle? It's the Laudate candle—*gaudate* is Latin for joy. It is pink **because rose is the liturgical color for joy**. ... You'll notice that all the scriptures today have a joyful theme. "Rejoice with all your heart, rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice! So you might ask—what on earth made them choose this Gospel?

Now I know it begins with John calling people a Brood of Vipers and continues with him talking about burning with unquenchable fire, but it concludes by saying, "*So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*" Good news is full of joy isn't it? Then why the unquenchable fire?

This is quite a rant on the part of John the Baptist. Makes me wonder what provoked him into calling the people a brood of vipers? Maybe there's a hint in the text:

"Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

It sounds as if John was telling them about the wrath to come if they didn't repent-- and someone pulled the "son of Abraham" card. You know—the "I don't have to worry, because I'm from the people of Israel, we are the descendants of Abraham and God's chosen people!" card.

Or --let's put it in contemporary words- words that might be a little more familiar to us: "I don't have to worry about any wrath to come—after all—I've already confessed that Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior! I'm a Christian. I've got that base covered."

What was John's response to their assertion? And how might John respond to us today?"

"Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'But I am a Christian'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up Christians! Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

Repentance. I love preaching on repentance. Repentance-- just to recap-- does NOT mean feeling really *really* sorry for something and begging forgiveness. The word repentance literally means to see our actions from a different perspective. To finally realize how our actions differ from what God expects of us – and how that sudden revelation utterly changes our understanding of EVERYTHING we do and have done—from the inside out.

It would be easier to think repenting means realizing we have done something wrong and asking forgiveness. It is certainly easier to feel sorry for something we have done in that moment, ask forgiveness--and then continue to do it again, ask for more forgiveness, and letting the cycle continue endlessly, sure of God's ability to forgive us. And God will. But God would prefer to CHANGE us.

Having one's life re-ordered and transformed means change. And repentance means to turn about—see things from a completely different angle which will change and re-forms our lives from that moment on! And the sign of repentance—of a completely changed perspective:

If God changes our hearts, what would be result-- the fruits—of that?

For example: do Christians *really believe* that God asks enormous love and respect from us for every person we meet? If we did believe that—and then we began to give enormous love and respect to everyone we met, what would be the fruits? I'm pretty sure we can't even imagine it, because we don't do it, consistently.

But God knows what would happen. And God yearns for us to experience what will happen.

So here's the question John poses for us: can we just continue to say we are Christian because we believe in a set of beliefs-- or will we *behave* in a way that mirrors those beliefs? Will we hide behind ideas-- ideas we say we believe—or will we risk being broken open by the Holy Spirit? Can we risk becoming Love in the world? What would that even look like?

The crowd asked John that very question: and he answered each one very specifically. He answered the soldier in one way, the tax collector in another. It's as if each of them was unique. *Because they were. We all are!*

If John were here, and we each asked him how repenting would look for *us*—having a complete change of perspective could change how we think and act: what do you think he would say to *you*? Would you even ask him? Would I? Do we really want to know? Think hard-- prophets can be brutally honest.

I think that we are often very reluctant to *really* repent—in the true sense of the word. We don't want what we've believed and how we've acted all these years to be called into question. We are so certain that we are behaving the way God intends. But what if we are not?

Can we allow our treasured ways of thinking and acting be broken open so that God can teach us how his love can shine through us in new ways for this beleaguered world?

That's exactly why the world needs prophets, and why John stood at those crossroads and prepared the way for Jesus.

As Father Richard Rohr says: “God will always be bigger than our hearts and minds are ready for.”

That would get an emphatic “**Yes!**” from John the Baptizer. It's not enough to be complacent and rest on our “But I'm a Christian” laurels—we are going to need to continually see things from a new perspective. Continually repent. Not just to be sorry for something we've done, but to let our new way of seeing each other—through God's eyes-- CHANGE us.

Will we, as followers of Jesus, allow our hearts and souls to be opened that wide? What would that look like for each of us? Just like we'll never know what's inside the pretty wrapping of a gift on Christmas morning until we unwrap it, we'll never know what's inside each of us unless we allow God to unwrap us. Change us. Complete us.

I'm sure if John were here, his advice to each of us would be as different as his answers were to the individuals he advised 2000 years ago. His advice to us would probably echo the suggestions he gave them:

- Share what you have.
- Play fair.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Do the next right thing.
- And most importantly, love and respect everyone.

This is the joy that God offers, and John preaches. Are we going to be satisfied to just be sorry for things we have done in the past-- and NOT to go on to the next step—letting that feeling change us? Will we allow our new perspective to break us open?

It's our choice.

“So, John-- with many other exhortations, proclaimed the *good news*-- on this Gaudate Sunday --to the people.”
Amen.