

There is an old wooden fence running from one corner of our house to the street. Well, I should say that there *was* a fence. At some point last Thursday evening, high winds took that fence from “rustic” to “hillbilly”, and I’m not really sure that I can call it a fence any more. It went from useful to “rustic” some years ago when our daughters grew up and moved out of the house, and we no longer had any need to keep children contained. Our cattle dog, Jack, went blind about four years ago and he doesn’t wander around that corner of the yard anymore, so the fence really has no functional use. It’s less “fence” and more an organized row of kindling. But I haven’t taken it down yet.

Maybe it’s time. Maybe the windstorm turned what used to be a fence into a reminder of the impermanence of all things. A reminder here at the heart of Advent that the very essence of the natural world is impermanence. Maybe what’s left of that collapsing fence is a visual notice that we can’t hold on. Not to anything. In time, we must finally let go—let go even of our selves. And yet, and yet...a certain *stability* in the midst of impermanence is possible. There is a way to live at peace with the natural cycles and inevitable changes of life.

We know about this pattern of life because God sent a man named John to tell us about a way of being alive in the face of death and decline. He talked about this way of life so that people would trust the source and meaning of all life. John wasn’t that source, of course, but he knew and trusted the source. That’s why he pointed out a way to let the true source shape our lives. One perfect expression of living life with stability in the midst of impermanence was still coming.

Today, “Gaudete Sunday,” marks the halfway point in Advent. We acknowledge this midpoint by lighting a rose-colored candle. The name, “Gaudete,” comes from the first word of an introit, a little snippet of music, that began the Eucharist in medieval churches. The introit comes from Philipians: “Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete,” which in English is: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.”

The introit reflects a theme for our readings this morning. From the letter to the Thessalonians, we heard this: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” These are Paul’s closing words to a community being tempted and persecuted while they waited for the Risen Christ to return. Paul’s words are not meant to mean simply, “be happy,” as though denying their circumstances would make it better. Paul’s words are both an invitation and a challenge to find ways to trust God under *all* circumstances.

We also prayed Psalm 126 together—a psalm that recalls past joy and expresses hope for still greater joy: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” I hope that you have all had some experience with that kind of joy: the birth of a child, a positive medical outcome, a new job, an opportunity for needed relaxation. If this morning finds you joyful, then I pray that God will shield that joy. The psalm goes on to plead for a larger joy—a collective joy that will flow like a river through a dry valley: “Restore *our* fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses of the Negev.”

Restore *all our* fortunes, O LORD, because even if we are joyful we also know that there are those among us struggling. Some with the inevitable processes of aging. Some working through medical trials. Some coping with the recent deaths of loved ones or memories of times past. Still others who are under-employed or jobless. Across the country, we are living with race relations that have stalled or even degraded back to the days of Dr. King. Americans are all living with a CIA Interrogation Report that exposed a set of policies and actions based primarily on fear; a report that has damaged our international standing. Any of these circumstances are a potential threat to our faith, much like the threats that our readings speak to that cause us to ask our God for joy in the midst of times that are not entirely joyful, at least not for everyone.

Rejoicing is hard to do when we are carrying grief or worry or fear. And that is precisely why we gather at table together with whatever is on our hearts and minds. We come to participate in a foretaste of Christmas rejoicing. As we approach the darkest day the year, in a dark time, we come here to be reminded that joy is a part of darkness.

We come to the table at this house because we trust, or at least we *want* to trust, that the light is coming. We come to live into hope.

The pattern for living into hope is outlined in the gorgeous reading from Isaiah that we heard this morning: "...because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted...my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, as a garden causes what is sown to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." That's what Isaiah had to say from the darkness of 500 years of exile in Babylon. Isaiah recognizing that God sends people whose hearts have been broken to bind up the brokenhearted.

You and I, that is. Just plain folks doing the best they can with what they've got at hand. On this Gaudete Sunday, we hear of a man—just a man—whose name was John. Not a person with a title, not an eccentric character or the charismatic leader of a huge movement—just a person. He was an ordinary person who acted in such extraordinary ways that the local religious leadership didn't quite know what to make of him. "Who are you?" they asked. His answer can be our answer: "I am a voice." John came as a witness to testify to the light—the light he introduces by saying: "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

The One who brings joy, who *is* the Light, is right here among us. We have a role to play because God uses each and every one of us, if we consent to be used for God's purposes. Our role is to find a way to say: "Let it be done unto me according to your will" and then to watch for our opportunities to act. We watch for displays of great power and majesty, and learn to see them in the endless cycles of nature that manifest the living God at work. In time, we learn that we can observe and participate in, but not *control*, God's on-going creation. To see nature flowing from God, the source of life, and to appreciate and flow with God's grace-filled creation—*that* is to participate in God's deeper joy.

Watching for the Spirit's movement in our day-to-day life is often far more subtle; the activity much smaller. The evidence of the light to come in our personal lives is often so transparent or delicate that it goes by us unnoticed; hidden in plain sight. With practice, we learn to trust that the Holy One is present and alive in the sometimes *very* real dark that surrounds us. With practice, *every so often* that growing trust allows us to catch little glimpses of Holy Fire in the faint light of our winters.

A couple of weeks ago, I was coming to the end of my morning prayers and I was walking out the front door to get the newspaper. I had a number of people and situations on my heart, but in particular, my prayers kept returning to a dear friend and his family. His daughter is dealing with a difficult medical situation and his wife is carrying a very different but emotionally weighty burden. I stood and silently offered up my prayers and then with perfect timing, as if it were the answer to my prayer, I heard the "pip" of a tiny Anna's hummingbird. I looked into the dim morning grey and then I heard it again. There at the end of our sagging fence in the bare sticks of a quince bush, I saw the flicker of his throat flashing in the cold mist. Just the merest twinkle of deep, fluorescent, rose-colored feathers—the deep rose of a living Gaudete call crying out in the wilderness: "Rejoice. Rejoice always." The life that is the light of all people is shining in the darkness and the darkness can never overcome it.