

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent: Matthew 11:2-11

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy Advent! And Happy Gaudete Sunday!

Now, that word, “Gaudete” might ring a silver bell in the back of your mind, or it might sound like something you’d say when you hit your thumb with a hammer. Gaudete just means “rejoice,” and the Third Sunday of Advent gets this nickname because of an old chant that started today’s service way back when. The idea was that Advent is long, and winter is hard, and all this preparation and shortening days and cold weather takes its toll on good Christian souls just trying to make it through the world. So, Gaudete Sunday became a little liturgical pressure valve to remind people that Christmas is on its way, sooner than you may realize, and while that might make you tense up thinking about all that’s still left to do, it’s also a joyful thing. It’s a break from the intensity of the season.

What a great thing to do. I mean, even those folks knew that Winter was hard and holidays were, too. Actually, they probably knew that way better than we do. I heard a song the other day, it’s the oldest song in the English language that isn’t connected to church. We’ve only got a fragment of it, basically just one verse, but it’s gorgeous. Written in the early 1200s, it’s called “Mirie it is,” and the lyrics are timeless:

Merry life is while the summer lasts
with sounds of bird song.
Oh but now the cold wind blasts,
it blows so strong.
Oh, oh, but this night is long
And it does to me much wrong:
sorrow and mourn and starve.

Makes me wanna sing “In the Bleak Midwinter” just to cheer up. Winter made people come together in ways they might not other times of year, crowding around fires and hoping the melt would come before food stores ran dry. Living through something like that breeds a sense of community. Hard as it is, Winter brings people closer, literally at first, but it knits them together like the warmest of blankets. Since I moved to Hamilton, I’ve marveled at the tightness of this place. I think surviving Winter here still brings us closer, like a shared enemy or a common goal. No matter what you believe, no matter who you voted for, you can walk into just about any store, shake the snow off your coat, shiver a little, and say, “cold one out there,” and you’ve got yourself a friend for life, or at least a friend through April.

The holiday season, starting with Thanksgiving and going through Christmas, it’s a joyful time full of anticipation and hope and excitement. There’s something just sort of light this time of year. At least that’s what we tell ourselves. After Colgate’s Lessons & Carols Friday night, it sure felt like that. I left the Colgate Chapel feeling like Christmas had never been closer! But also, I’ve felt a ton of grief this year. Maybe some of y’all have too? Over the past four years, my family and my life has done somersaults. Seemed like every three months something newly terrible happened, from deaths to divorces to emergency surgeries. Every member of my family got hit with something. Then Covid came, and that’s been a whole thing. And church closed, and I got sick, and we lost people to all sorts of things, and now my in-laws are having that weirdly systematic-feeling somersault of tragedy hit them.

You know, grief and worry, they take some time to process. Worry we can work through and sometimes even set aside. But grief, grief is different. You can process grief, you can work on it, you can try to set it aside, but grief doesn’t play by the rules. The Kubler-Ross classic Five Stages of Grief gave us this helpful framework to understand why a loved one’s death might make us feel angry, say, but that same framework also gives the

false sense that, at some point, you'll just accept whatever happened and never hurt again. And that just ain't so. It can begin to feel better, or hurt less often, but grief doesn't leave us. And it sneaks up on us, sometimes years later, weeping over someone we lost and lived without a decade since. And we often feel like that's wrong. Most of us don't look forward to crying out of nowhere. It feels embarrassing or shameful, or maybe it makes us mad at ourselves for being, I don't know, weak? But that's not fair. And it also assumes that tears are a bad thing.

You know what? I've been through a lot these past four years, and as heavy as that's been, it's made me more aware of what other folks are going through, too. I'm a better spouse for it, at least I hope I am. And I think I'm a better pastor for it, too. I also know that, while this has been a particularly dense period of loss for me, I'm not unique. Actually, it's kinda like Winter in that sense. No one goes through life avoiding grief. It's not possible. Maybe grief could be another shared thing. Like Winter, we don't have to do it alone. Maybe we can't do it alone. No matter what you believe, no matter who you voted for, you can walk into just about any store, shake the snow off your coat, shiver a little, and say, "it's been hard lately," and while some folks just don't know how to handle that kinda honesty, they'll feel it, too. And you just might open a door to hold each other's grief.

Can you imagine that happening at Tractor Supply? You wanna know something? It does. I know 'cause I watched it happen. Some old feller was in line in front of me doing all the old feller grunts in place of responses made out of actual words. The teller asked the feller the go-to questions, "Find everything you need? Do you have a phone number with us? Want a receipt?" "Uh." he replied stoically. Then he took his stuff and headed for the door, but he stopped in his tracks, pointed to a little table with a sign and a 'Get Well Soon' card and a pen, and said, "Terry sick? Oh no. Can I sign this?" And from there on, the teller and the feller talked up a storm, covering all their collective woes. If I'da been in a hurry, I'da been put out, but I wasn't, so it was fun to watch and grunt along, too. And you know what? I have never seen any of those characters before in my life, and I don't know Terry from Adam, but I signed that card, and I left feeling like I was part of a community that I didn't even know existed before.

These days, I think a big part of what Gaudete Sunday is for us is less about Rejoicing (though maybe that's still hidden in there somewhere) and more about recognizing the many, many griefs we carry. So many griefs have hit so many of us so fast, that they just keep piling on top of each other and we bury 'em down deep, hold 'em somewhere in our bodies, and then just move through the things we've got to do in life, carrying extra added weight one more tragedy at a time. And they keep coming so fast that we don't have the chance to stop to pick one up, look at it, feel it, come to love that we had something to lose in the first place and make space for the tears that need to come. We just don't have the time, or the energy, or the space to do what we need to do with each grief, so the pile keeps on getting bigger. And then we just exist, knowing we're carrying too much but unable to unload any of it. And then when we do get the time or the energy or the space, maybe we're worried that if we pick up the most recent grief from the top of the stack that it'll tump the whole thing over and everything we've carried for the last year or decade or lifetime'll come spilling out all at once. And none of us, none of us have the time or the energy or the space for all that.

Winter's hard, in part, because a lot of things shift to make more time and space in places we didn't have when the days were longer. Sure, it's cold and windy and, while we don't have to worry about the Price Chopper running out of pork chops, some buried part of our brains remembers the lean days ahead. We enter this communal challenge carrying our own weight, and more than anything we need to sit with each other by the fire and let the season and the time and the cold work on us. And maybe, just maybe we need to weep. Maybe we need to weep for a minute or two, or an hour, or a month, I don't know. It takes however long it takes. And days like Thanksgiving and Christmas and all the little moments between those two holidays full of traditions

and family recipes and old ornaments from great-Aunt Suzy's collection that you don't really like but feel obligated to put out anyway -- these are hard days. Because we're conflicted in a million different emotional directions. We tell ourselves we should be happy. And we should be excited. And we should be nothing but bundles of love.

But also, we're tired, and we're grieving (or not letting ourselves grieve), and we're worried about travel, and we're nervous about that one tricky dish that everyone loves but you always get wrong, and we're scared that Uncle Jim is going to come this year and say something weird, and we're fretting over Cousin George who doesn't have a place to stay where he lives on the street out West but won't let the family help him, and much as we all love that one matriarch (you know the one), lord knows she isn't the most pleasant person to be around, and we're worried that we can scrub the house from the dirt-floored basement all the way to the sky and someone'll still find a single dusty shelf and judge our moral capacity because of it, and we're 100% certain that the house will be a disaster after everyone leaves and we'll just have to do it all over again to recover, and we're not terribly excited about our routines getting overturned, and honestly, in spite of everything on paper, or because of everything on paper, we're sad.

And we don't want to put up a tree this year, because it feels false. And we don't want to give gifts because the one person we really want to give a gift to won't be here for Christmas for the first time, And how are we even supposed to celebrate when the world is what it is? I'd say we need us a Sabbath. And we need us a Savior.

And then, from our prison cell, John the Baptizer calls, "Are you the one we've been waiting for? Are you our place to weep, our comfort in the storm, our calm before the whirlwind, our warm place to worry? Or are we just gonna have to do this all over again for someone else? Were we wrong, was all this for nothing?" "My Kingdom comes," Jesus says. "Rejoice."