
Amazing Grace That Saved a Brooding Viper Like Me

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
Advent 3 – Year C**

It's possible that after listening to today's collect and scripture readings you're feeling a bit of mental whiplash.

We began with prayer: Stir up your power, O Lord! We are weighed down with sin—save us with your grace!

Then our epistle: Rejoice! Don't worry about anything—bring it to God.

And finally our Gospel: You brood of vipers! Anyone not bearing fruit will burn with unquenchable fire. And they call this "good news."

The remarkable thing is—it is good news. It's good news because we need to remember that the point of Christmas... the whole reason God became incarnate in the person of Jesus, birthed into this world the same way we all came into this world after gestating in the womb of a woman... the story behind that story is that God came near to us to save us from sin.

God didn't just take on human form for the fun of it, or out of curiosity. God made Godself a small vulnerable child, who became an awkward teenager, who became a revolutionary young adult, who died a gruesome death, and who beat down death with resurrection and glory... God did all that to save us from sin.

Sin. That three-letter word we rarely talk about in the Episcopal church outside confirmation classes and the communal confession we recite weekly in the liturgy, sometimes earnestly, sometimes without thinking.

It's fascinating, isn't it? That sin is something we all have in common, but don't talk about much? That sin is actually a significant part of why we go to church, since the church exists to proclaim Jesus is savior, that Jesus saves. Saves us from what? Sin. Are we going to talk about that? Not really. It's so much easier to focus on God's bountiful mercy and saving grace than to remember *what* we need saving from.

Paul writes from prison to the struggling church in Philippi: Rejoice! Rejoice always! Again I say, rejoice! He doesn't say this because he and the Philippian church are happy that there once was a great teacher named Jesus, who was once a cute baby and eventually a pretty nice guy, and aren't we glad he taught us all to love God and our neighbor. He's saying "rejoice" because that same Jesus taught us about love by saving us from sin.

I know it may seem strange to couple rejoicing with sin, but that's exactly what Christmas does.

The birth of Jesus is significant because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which is significant because death and sin no longer have the last word. A *savior* is born—meaning we are saved... from sin.

But to be saved from something, we first have to know we are trapped by something. And that's why we need to hear John's words in preparation for Jesus. John says that no matter what family you're born into, or who you're connected to, unless you are growing and bearing fruit, you'll be cut down and thrown into the fire. And while fire is good, because it warms us and creates energy, I'd rather stay upright and keep growing. Wouldn't you?

It's interesting to me that when the people ask John, "what should we do?" He doesn't say anything that hasn't already been said before. He basically says share what you have and don't cheat or be greedy about

possessions or power. He doesn't even name some of the bigger sins that might come to mind. He instead talks about what breaks down community—the sin of looking out for ourselves with no regard for our neighbor.

It's also interesting to me that what John points to seems to center on how we spend or share our resources... in other words, money. Ah, money. Yet another word we tend to skirt around. Just like sin, money is something that applies to all of us! And yet it's somehow rude to bring it up. It's uncomfortable to talk about how much we have, or don't have, or should have, or give, or don't give, or should give.

The one exception to this in my experience is discussing how ridiculous rent is in Manhattan. In every New York apartment Jay and I ever lived in, we were sure to get the question from at least one guest: how much do you pay for this place? It was as casual and common a question as: how's the weather?

So we don't want to talk about sin, and we don't want to talk about money, yet somehow both are tangled up with rejoicing. When we are saved from sin, we rejoice. And when we share what have, we rejoice.

I want to tell you a story. Two years ago, on ingathering Sunday, a Sunday like last Sunday when we bring our pledges forward to the altar, offering ourselves and our resources to God, I was sitting over there, in one of those stalls. I wasn't sitting with my family because I was, you know, working. And like many Sundays, my husband wasn't sitting with my family either, because he too was working. So our oldest child, who was four at the time, was sitting in the front row with a beloved parishioner and friend. When the choir began to sing the Alleluias and we all joined in, up walked my child holding the pledge card of our friend. He placed it in the basket and smiled. And I dissolved into a puddle of tears watching the church show up for my child in a way Jay and I could not that day. This wonderfully caring adult was teaching my child what it looks like to be part of a church community. This generous and thoughtful adult was teaching my child the joy of giving. Rejoice!

And then last week when those same Alleluias began and people made their way to the altar, I again found myself in tears, rejoicing at the how this community takes something that can be used for wealth and power, and chooses individually and collectively to use it for love. Rejoice!

Yes, this is certainly a season for rejoicing. We rejoice not just because a savior is born, we rejoice because we are saved from sin! We rejoice not because of how much we have, we rejoice because of how much we are able to give!

Real rejoicing comes when we know what's at stake. Real rejoicing comes not in the absence of sin or suffering or difficult times, real rejoicing comes in the midst of it all.

So rejoice with me this week! Not just because you like Christmas carols, and Christmas lights, and Christmas smells, and it's the most wonderful time of the year—as much as I hope those things are true for you, for many that's not real life. Rejoice with me this week, not because of the growing pile of presents under the tree or the promise of a big bonus—as much as I hope that is true for you, it will never be enough until you realize with joy that you have more than enough to share. Instead, rejoice with me because God is with us, Immanuel, and God saves us. Through Jesus Christ our *Savior*, Amen.