

Advent3C_121315_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

Welcome to the third Sunday of Advent! In many churches today, there is a pink candle instead of purple or blue lit on the Advent wreath. This Sunday is traditionally called *Gaudete* or *Rejoice* Sunday, from the Latin *Gaudete in Domino semper* - the phrase in Philippians that says, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

When Advent was thought to be more penitential in nature rather than preparatory, this day was meant to give folks a chance to relax a little from the rigors of repentance - to 'lighten up' as it were. From Zephaniah: "Rejoice and exult with all your heart! Shout!" And from Canticle 9: "Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things." And Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

I don't know about you, but these recent days and weeks and months don't always make me feel like rejoicing: refugees are fleeing for their lives from their native countries; young - and not so young - black men are losing their lives at the hands of some out-of-control police officers; political figures are twisting facts to their own benefit and encourage by their hateful rhetoric the dangerous actions of their followers, all couched in the sanctity of being 'good Christians.' How do we rejoice in the face of all this unrest, this hate, this evil?

I guess that with all those questions, it's a good thing we have today's Gospel reading to balance things out. John the Baptist has been preaching about the coming of the Messiah, and a large crowd is following him. In today's lesson, however, he does not tell them to rejoice. He yells at them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And he tells them that every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire!

What?! Vipers?! Axes?! Fire?! Not exactly a 'pink' sort of moment!

So the crowd asks him, "What then should we do?" And John tells them very specifically what they should do, which depends on who or what they are. If you have two coats (if you are wealthy) you must share with anyone who has none; if you have food, you have to do the same. If you are a tax collector, don't cheat the

people from whom you are collecting. If you are a soldier, don't threaten anyone or make false accusations against anyone.

John is straight and to the point - a lot like his cousin, Jesus will be: Love God. Love people. Love yourself. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick. Welcome the stranger. Straight and to the point.

But today is not only Gaudete Sunday. It has been named Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend - observing the third anniversary of the Newtown, CT massacre of 20 elementary school children and 6 adults on Dec. 14, 2012. Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath is a cooperative effort on the part of many faiths - Christian, Jewish, Islam, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh and Universalist - in a group called Faiths United to prevent Gun Violence - to bring attention to the continuing travesty of gun violence that is plaguing our country.

We - All Saints Church - pledged to participate in this weekend, along with hundreds of other churches, mosques, temples and synagogues by talking about it in the sermon, and by praying about it in our prayers. We will use a litany written by the Bishop of Maine for this particular day.

I know feelings get hot when this subject is brought up. Please take a deep breath if just the idea of this is already making you feel anxious. This will not be a debate about guns today. This is about how we treat each other when we disagree about guns, or about religion, or about what color your skin is, or about whether I agree with you or with my neighbor. If we don't treat each other with respect and dignity, violence might not be far behind, and we must do everything we can to diffuse it!

"What should we do?" the crowd asked John.

What should WE do?

I want to read you a letter - about what we can do. It is written in regard to one target of violence. It applies to all targets. Straight and to the point.

Dear Non-Muslim Allies,

I am writing to you because it has gotten just that bad. I have found myself telling too many people about the advice given to me years ago by the late

composer Herbert Brun, a German Jew who fled Germany at the age of 15: "Be sure that your passport is in order." It's not enough to laugh at Donald Trump anymore. The rhetoric about Muslims has gotten so nasty, and is everywhere, on every channel, every newsfeed. It is clearly fueling daily events of targeted violence, vandalism, vigilante harassment, discrimination. I want you to know that it has gotten bad enough that my family and I talk about what to keep on hand if we need to leave quickly, and where we should go, maybe if the election goes the wrong way, or if folks get stirred up enough to be dangerous before the election. When things seem less scary, we talk about a five or ten year plan to go somewhere where cops don't carry guns and hate speech isn't allowed on network television. And if you don't already know this about me, I want you to know that I was born in this country. I have lived my whole life in this country. I have spent my entire adult life working to help the poor, the disabled, and the dispossessed access the legal system in this country. And I want you to know that I am devoutly and proudly Muslim. I am writing this in response to a non-Muslim friend's question about what she can do. Because there is much that can be done in solidarity:

If you see a Muslim or someone who might be identified as Muslim being harassed, stop, say something, intervene, call for help.

If you ride public transportation, sit next to the hijabi woman and say 'asalam 'alaykum (that means 'peace to you'). Don't worry about mispronouncing it; she won't care. Just say "peace" if you like. She'll smile; smile back. If you feel like it, start a conversation. If you don't, sit there and make sure no one harasses her.

If you have a Muslim work colleague, check in. Tell them that the news is horrifying and you want them to know you're there for them.

If you have neighbors who are Muslim, keep an eye out for them. If you're walking your kids home from the bus stop, invite their kids to walk with you.

Talk to your kids. They're picking up on the anti-Muslim message. Make sure they know how you feel and talk to them about what they can do when they see bullying or hear hate speech at school.

Call out hate speech when you hear it - if it incites hatred or violence against a specified group, call it out: in your living room, at work, with friends, in public. It is most important that you do this among folks who may not know a Muslim.

Set up a "learn about Islam" forum at your book club, school, congregation, dinner club. Call your state CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) organization, interfaith group or local mosque and see if there is someone who has speaking experience and could come and answer questions about Islam and American Muslims for your group. They won't be offended. They will want the opportunity to do something to dispel the nastiness.

Write Op Eds and articles saying how deplorable the anti-Muslim rhetoric has gotten and voice your support for Muslim Americans in whatever way you can. Call your state and local representatives, let them know that you are concerned about hate speech against your Muslim friends and neighbors in politics and the media, that it is unacceptable and you want them to call it out whenever they hear it, on your behalf.

Out yourself as someone who won't stand for Islamophobia, or will stand with Muslims - there is an awful lot of hate filling the airways, and there are an awful lot of people with access to the media and/or authority stirring the pot about Muslims. Please help fill that space with support instead. Post, write, use your profile picture or blog to voice your support.

...Engage the Muslims in your life. Make sure you really feel comfortable standing for and with your Muslim friends, neighbors, coworkers.

I can tell you that in addition to the very real threat to their civil and human rights that Muslims are facing, we are dealing with a tremendous amount of anxiety. While we, many of us, rely on our faith to stay strong, we are human. This is not an easy time. What you do will mean everything to the Muslim Americans around you. Thank you for reading and bless you in your efforts. Share freely.

- Sofia Ali-Khan

Christians stand against violence. Christians stand up against murder. Christians work for justice. Straight and to the point. Come, Lord Jesus. Come among us and restore us. Amen.