


In the Name of the Father and of the  Son and of the Holy Spirit. [*Congregation: Amen.*]

Dearly beloved by the Lord:

Hope. Faith. Joy. Peace. Those are the traditional names—or titles—for the Advent candles. Of course, the term traditional may be a bit of a stretch, seeing as the modern Advent wreath originated a little less than two hundred years ago.<sup>1</sup> What's more, those names—hope, faith, joy, and peace—are even newer than the Advent wreath itself. They came about in the late 1960s. When Rome unveiled the three-year lectionary cycle for the church,<sup>2</sup> one of the results was the shift in Advent's focus: from a penitential season to a season of hope.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the classic names of the Sundays in Advent were replaced with the thematic names hope, faith, joy, and peace, with some minor variations appearing in different denominations.<sup>4</sup> Hope. Faith. Joy. Peace.

Of those four, only joy aligns with the historic lectionary.<sup>5</sup> As you know, this is the week of *Gaudete*, which, in Latin, means rejoice; this is the week of joy amidst the penitential season of Advent. Certainly, as we heard about on Sunday,<sup>6</sup> witnessing Jesus perform the signs of the promised Coming One—in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy—must have elicited joy in the previously doubting hearts of John's disciples. And tonight, we hear about John himself leaping in his mother's womb for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting.

Why, though? Why does John leap for joy? It's because the Coming One comes, as the hymnist pleads, “not in terrors, as the King of kings, but kind and good, with healing in [His] wings.”<sup>7</sup> John leaped in his mother's womb for joy because the Coming One comes **in remembrance of His mercy**, as the Blessed Virgin sings.

After Adam and his wife ate of the tree that God had forbidden them to eat, **they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.**<sup>8</sup> They hid themselves from His presence because they knew they had sinned. God had made them—as He had all things—good. Yet they had ruined that goodness in themselves. What would God do with imperfect creatures in His perfect creation? “Surely, He will do away with us,” they must've thought. “Yet if we hide, then, perhaps, we might escape His wrath and displeasure,” their now-fallen intellect likely reasoned.

That's the thing with sin: it knows it has earned God's wrath. And so, sinners try to hide their fallenness—their sinfulness from God. Sin—and sinners—are opposed and enemies of God, on the one hand. Yet, on the other hand, sin—and sinners—intrinsically know that they cannot abide in His presence. Worse, they expect His wrath.

Now, make no mistake: God cannot abide sin; He is holy, that is, without—and hating—sin.<sup>9</sup> As the Scriptures declare: **He takes [no] pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with [Him]. The [proud] shall not stand before [His] eyes; [He hates] all who do iniquity.**<sup>10</sup> Even so, holiness is not God's chief attribute or characteristic. No, rather, love is; **God is love.**<sup>11</sup> And love is not some abstract idea or feeling; it's an action.

Despite Adam and his wife's rebellion and the corruption they brought, both upon themselves and inflicted upon His perfect creation, the LORD God does not give up on them or do away with them; far from it. **God is love**, and so He comes to them: they who can no longer come to Him. **God is love**, and so He calls out to them: they who hide because of their sin. **God is love**, and so He promises them redemption and covers them with the life of another. **God is love**, and so He acts.

He acts in a way that is contrary to what they deserve. That's mercy. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Adam and his wife did not receive what their sin deserved: God's wrath and eternal punishment.

Likewise, we, their descendants, who walk in their sinful footsteps, as it were, do not receive what our sins—our anger, covetousness, jealousy, lust, and violence—have earned. What we, as sinners, deserve is for God to give up on us and do away with us. Yet He doesn't; He acts toward us in a way that is contrary to what we deserve.

That's what has the prenatal John leaping for joy in his mother's womb; that's what elicits Mary's *Magnificat*:<sup>12</sup> God's mercy. God doesn't give the human race what it deserves. Instead, He, the Father Almighty, sends His Son, who, Himself, is very God of very God, into the world. God comes to us because we cannot come to Him. He calls out and speaks to us, we who, by nature, hide from Him because of our sins. And He not only promises us redemption; more than that, He secures it for us by hanging upon the Cross in our place: He covers our debt of sin by paying it Himself.

God has taken of flesh to act on your behalf. Believe it, Beloved. He does not deal with you according to how you deserve. **God is love**; He acts: He comes to be your **Saviour**.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, lay aside all that causes you grief and distress; lay aside all your doubts and fears. Whether they stem from heartache, sorrow, sickness, disease, or even death itself, lay them all aside. Let your heart leap for joy with John. Let your soul magnify the Lord with Mary. *Gaudete*. Rejoice. For Christ Jesus, the Coming One, who, in this Gospel yet resides within the womb of the Virgin, comes in this way to rescue and redeem us. He comes **in remembrance of His mercy**. He comes because He is God's mercy in the flesh.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. [*Congregation: Amen.*]

✠ Soli Deo Gloria ✠

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<sup>1</sup> Research indicates that in 1839, a German Lutheran pastor, Rev. Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–1831), decorated a wheel with twenty-four small red candles and four large white candles. One small candle was lit successively every weekday and Saturday during Advent, and a large white candle was lit each Sunday. Haemig, Mary Jane. “The Origin and Spread of the Advent Wreath.” *Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2005, pp. 332-343.

<sup>2</sup> In 1969, Rome released *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, a three-year lectionary from which Protestant denominations developed what is now called the Revised Common Lectionary (RCS). The LCMS three-year lectionary is a slightly altered form of the RCS, which, again, is based on Rome’s *Ordo*.

<sup>3</sup> “[T]he Second Vatican Council, in order to differentiate the spirit of Advent from that of Lent, emphasized that Advent was a season of hope...” “Celebrating Advent: its History and Traditions.” *Inside the Vatican*, 4 Apr. 2023, <http://insidethevatican.com/magazine/celebrating-advent-its-history-and-traditions>

Incidentally, this change also spurred the changing of colors, from violet to blue, for the season of Advent, as blue is meant to represent hope, whereas violet represents repentance.

<sup>4</sup> Some variations are Hope–Love–Joy–Peace, Hope–Peace–Joy–Love, and Faith–Prepare–Joy–Love. Sometimes, these variations go by other names, such as Prophets–Bethlehem–Shepherds–Angels or Prophets–Angels–Shepherds–Magi, yet even these differing names follow the thematic ordering of hope, faith, joy, and peace, or hope, peace, joy, and love.

<sup>5</sup> I suppose one could press those other three names upon the Sundays in Advent if one were so inclined; I, however, will not try.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 11:2-6 [2-11]

<sup>7</sup> Lyte, Henry F. “Abide with Me.” *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006. #878:3.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 3:8

<sup>9</sup> See *An Explanation of the Small Catechism*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1991. pg. 106, Question #95, G.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 5:4-5 NASB

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 4:8b

<sup>12</sup> *Magnificat* is Latin for magnifies. As with many liturgical hymns drawn from the Scriptures, the first Latin word is often the hymn’s name.

<sup>13</sup> KJV