

“Are you the one to come, or are we to expect another?” These are curious words sent to Jesus from John who was in prison. It is a curious text to hear on the Sunday known as Gaudete Sunday, from the first word of the Introit, rejoice.

John was the son of the old priest Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. When Zechariah heard they would be having a baby, like Sarah centuries earlier, who laughed at the news that she and Abraham would have a baby, Zechariah too laughed with incredulity. The news left Zechariah speechless, literally. He lost his voice for nine months. He was a priest who could not sing in the temple or offer the intercessions for the

people. Vocationally impotent he languished in a prison of silence.

When Zechariah and Elizabeth’s baby was born, and they named him John, the beloved, Zechariah’s voice was restored; and like Mary at the Annunciation,



Zechariah sang the most beautiful song. The text of this song has become one of the church’s most frequently used canticles. It is a liturgical anthem of the church that begins the day in Morning Prayer. We know it as the Benedictus.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited, and redeemed his people.” It is a song of liberation, a song of deliverance, a song of recollection of the great covenant first made with Abraham: “that the people who walked in darkness would see a great light, and those who walked in the shadow of death would be guided into the way of peace.”

So years later, no doubt long after Zechariah and Elizabeth have died, John is thrown in prison. The only thing John did wrong was speak against Herod’s marriage to his half-brother’s wife, Herodias.

Languishing in prison, John’s father’s song is still known.

And John sends a message to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect another?”

Jesus replied, “Tell John what you see and hear.” In other words give him your testimony.

What they heard and saw reminded them of Jesus' first day of public ministry. It was in the synagogue in Nazareth, and Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed and the year of the Lord's favour.

As he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant, the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him, and he said, "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

So the testimony that they brought back to John confirmed that this is the One; that this is the "year (the season, the time) of the Lord's favour," because we have the evidence from what we see and hear: the blind receive the sight, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed, and the captives are set free. It is what he heard referenced in Isaiah: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

When that testimony reached John in prison, his heart sang for joy; just as his father's heart sang

for joy when he was born; and just as the baby in his mother's womb leapt for joy when Mary came to greet Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea.

Because John knew, just as his parents knew, this was the anointed One come to set them free. So in prison John could now gently sing that text from Isaiah, the "ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Their testimony was sufficient for John. That's all he needed in prison to restore his joy.

Even in prison John is pointing us to the one who is the Messiah, that the apostolic testimony might be even more clearly heard for us. So that regardless of what desert, or wilderness, or barren land, or prison we find ourselves in, there is always hope. The entire message of the scriptures, from Abraham, Moses, Mary, Zechariah, and to John is one of liberation, life, and light so that our joy, like theirs, might be restored. May this be the song in your heart forever.