

# Gaudete Sunday: Breaking the Rules

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by Roberto Rojas Jr.

Gaudete Sunday breaks all the rules. Though part of Advent, it stands out from it. It departs from everything you expect in a typical Advent Sunday. As you already know, Advent is a time to repent and hear of the coming of the Lord. Though repentance is usually thought of as a sad, mournful attitude, which it is, there is something joyful about it as well. Gaudete Sunday gives us another perspective and a glimpse of the joy that awaits us.

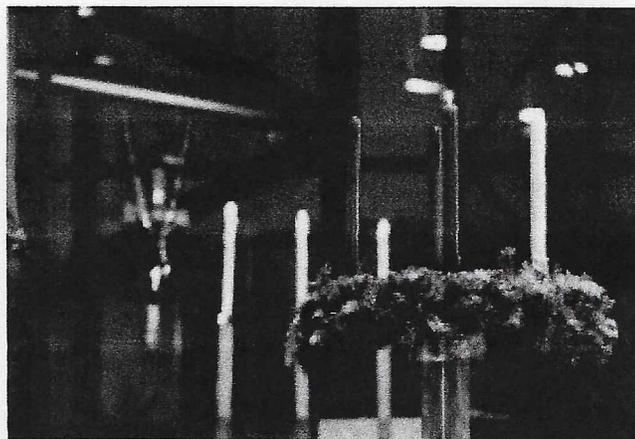
## Breaking it down

There are three main ways that Gaudete breaks all the rules. First, Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, comes from the Latin word that means “be glad” or “rejoice.” It’s taken from the first line of the day’s Introit, which doesn’t come from the Old Testament or the Psalm but from the New Testament: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say: Rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4).

Next, as a result of this, the colors of the vestments (the liturgical garments worn by the pastors) and the paraments (the ornamental ecclesiastical hangings that adorn altars, pulpits and the like) “lighten up” from violet to rose. The only other time this happens is during Laetare Sunday in Lent. Furthermore, the rose candle on the Advent wreath is lit. The organ and all the instruments burst forth with joy!

Finally, we are called to rejoice while hearing the Gospel text, Matt. 11:2–10, which appears to be one of the least joyful events in the New Testament!

You can start to see how Gaudete is slightly different from the rest of Advent, yet it fits right in. The overarching theme is on the coming of Christ in three ways: His first, His present and His final Advent. Gaudete focuses on the first of these: Christ’s first Advent in the flesh. On this Sunday, which also tells us of John’s imprisonment, the Church reflects upon the Lord who has come as long promised. We are called to repent, rest and rejoice in our Lord always.



## Easy rejoicing

It's easy to rejoice in the Lord when things go well or when life goes our way. It's simple to be joyful in the Lord when we have a faithful spouse, obedient children and money in our bank accounts. But we are called to rejoice always. That means that we rejoice even when we lack these things. Nothing can teach us this truth better than Matthew 11.

John is in jail because of Jesus. John faithfully and unabashedly preached God's Word: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2). He didn't bend to the teachings of the culture like a reed blowing in the wind. He didn't attract people with his trendy, hipster appearance and diet. All he had was the Word of God. He showed no partiality. John stood up tall, and with great love, he called Herod to repentance, even though he could have lost his life for doing so.

Scripture says, "For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet" (Matt. 14:3-5). Herod didn't like John or his sermons, so he sought to shut him up. Instead of repenting, King Herod rejected God's Word, lounged around in soft clothes in his comfy home and threw John in prison to die. Why? All because John broke the culture's unwritten rule: "Don't offend anyone with the Word of God."

That's the context. John had only done what God told him to do. But now the ministry that God gave him was coming to an end. The world scoffed and mocked this reckless failure of a life. The disciples of John, and even John himself, were wondering if it was all worth it. John sat alone in prison, waiting

to die, beginning to doubt whether Jesus really was the Christ. He threw down the gauntlet and sent his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

## Jesus speaks

How does Jesus respond? He didn't simply say "yes" or "no." Rather, he answered with His works. He pointed them to see and hear what kings and prophets longed for. He answered them: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended (scandalized) by me" (Matt. 11:4-6). He proved Himself by His works and words. He taught them to observe that He fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament; only the Promised One could do that.

Now John, the greatest preacher, was being preached to! John, the greatest man born of a woman and more than a prophet (Matt. 11:10-11), was now hearing the one born of a virgin and the one who fulfilled all prophecies. Jesus blessed John in jail. He blessed all those who believe what the preacher has preached. Even though John couldn't observe or measure the success or church growth from his preaching, Jesus blessed him beyond measure.

Even though John would remain in prison and eventually be beheaded (Matt. 14:1-12), Jesus' blessing gave him a reason to rejoice in the Lord always. With these words, it wasn't just that John's mission and purpose in life were validated, but that his salvation was made even more certain! It's as if Jesus said, "John, while you sit in prison accomplishing nothing, do you know what's happening? I, the one you preached about, am restoring all creation. I am undoing what sin, death and the devil have done. I'm preaching forgiveness freely to the poor. Though you are persecuted and poor now, rejoice, for great is your reward in heaven. Therefore, My son, be comforted and be happy. Do not be frightened. If this is true for all of those who hear the Word of God, then, it is true for you as well."

## Upside down and backwards

That is what we learn on Gaudete Sunday! Gaudete breaks the rules because Jesus breaks the rules. He makes the blind see, the mute speak and the dead rise. He even causes the persecuted to rejoice. He brings joy in

times of sadness. He does this by fulfilling His own promises and speaking words of eternal life.

He broke the “rules” we have for God and our expectations of Him. God, whom the heavens and earth cannot contain, lays Himself down in a manger. The Holy One of Israel, who knew no sin, became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). The author of life dies on a cross and lays Himself down in the grave. The one who humbled Himself unto death is resurrected from the dead.

In doing this, He doesn't seek your punishment but your joy by forgiving all of your sins. He breaks the rule of sin and sadness over you, and He gives you joy that cannot be taken away. In breaking all of the rules, He's only doing what He promised from long ago. You need look no further. Look to no one else: He is the promised One who has come to bring you joy.

Gaudete teaches us to repent from finding joy in health, wealth and success. It teaches us to repent from measuring the “growth” of the church through finances, attendance and demographics. It teaches us to repent from doubting God's promises and searching for happiness in the things in this world and to find true joy in His Word. Gaudete forms and shapes our understanding of Advent and Christmas by teaching us that true joy is found only in Christ.

Because of this, we can rejoice even in the midst of grief and sadness, even if we are persecuted, even if there is no restoration, even if there is no healing or cure for a sickness. It teaches us to rest from trying to find joy, knowing that joy has found us. The “joy” of this world is for a moment, but joy in Christ is everlasting. Therefore, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say: Rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4).

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