

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 104

Matthew 3:1-12

Rejoice, for the God Who Draws Near Meets Us in Our Humanity

Sermon preached by Sesi Taunga

Malo e Lelei and Good morning, Church!

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, a Sunday when the Church invites us to rejoice. Sometimes, just hearing the word *Rejoice!* can feel a little overwhelming.

Life isn't perfect. We are tired. We are worried. We are still waiting.

Some of us are hopeful, and some of us are quietly panicking. Advent holds all of that together. It reminds me of Advent in Tonga. Families begin preparing for Christmas months in advance. I remember my grandmother telling me and my cousins. *"If we start preparing for Christmas now, by Christmas we will have enough food to feed the whole village."*

My cousins and I looked at each other with worried faces and asked, "Grandma, won't it all go bad before Christmas?" She laughed and said, *"Ah, my grandchildren, that's Advent. Advent is about hope, preparation, and a little panic."*

We laugh because we recognise ourselves in that story. Advent is life as it really is, messy, joyful, anxious and hopeful. This is exactly the place where God meets us. Not because we are perfect, but because God draws near to our humanity, our fears, our weaknesses, our doubts, and our joy.

Isaiah 35: God Comes to Our Humanity

Isaiah speaks to people who are weary and afraid. He speaks. *"The desert shall rejoice and blossom. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knee. Say to those who are of a fearful heart. Be strong, do not fear. God will come and save you."* (Isaiah 35)

When we think about that:

- The desert blooms.
- The weak are strengthened.
- Fearful hearts hear good news.

This is not just poetry. It is eschatological hope, a vision of God's kingdom breaking into the world as it is. God does not wait for us to be perfect. God does not wait for us to be strong. God comes to the deserts of our hearts, the places where we feel tired, uncertain, or afraid.

But notice something important. Isaiah's vision is not only for the broken. It is for all of humanity.

God comes to heal what is wounded, but God also comes to bless what is already good. Where there is happiness, God deepens it. Where there is laughter, God joins in. Where there is celebration, God delights. Advent is about God entering the full spectrum of our humanity, not only our mess, but also our joy.

Transition: From Promise to Human Struggle

Isaiah paints a beautiful picture of hope, deserts blooming, weak hands strengthened, fearful hearts comforted. Yet even as we hear these promises, we know life is not always so clearly filled with joy and renewal. Sometimes we long for God's presence, yet doubt creeps in. We wonder if God's kingdom will truly break into our world.

This tension between promise and human doubt is where Matthew 11 begins. John the Baptist, the prophet who prepared the way, finds himself in a place of uncertainty and fear. Sitting in prison, he wonders if the One he has proclaimed is truly the Messiah.

He sends a question to Jesus. *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*

Jesus answers him. *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receives their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."* (Matthew 11:4–5, NRSV)

Jesus is showing John that the kingdom Isaiah promised is breaking in, and that God's nearness is visible in these signs of healing, hope, and transformation. This is Advent theology at its heart. God draws near to our humanity, in doubt and in faith, in weakness and in joy.

Reflection: God's Nearness in Real Places

When we say that God draws near to our humanity, we do not mean this only as an idea. We mean it in real places, among real people.

God's nearness echoes in our church when we gather to worship, when we pray for one another, when we sing, and when we sit quietly together in silence.

God's nearness echoes in the hospital, in waiting rooms and hospital beds, in whispered prayers, in the courage of patients, in the compassion of doctors and nurses, in hands that hold other hands.

God's nearness echoes in our families around kitchen tables, in celebrations and laughter, and also in moments of pain, conflict, and silence.

These are holy places. Not because they are perfect, but because God is present there. This is the mystery of Emmanuel. God with us, in pews and hospital rooms, in living rooms and waiting rooms, in joy and in sorrow, in strength and in weakness. Wherever humanity is deeply felt, God is already drawing near.

Here, the wisdom of a Pacific theologian, Sione 'Amanaki Havea, resonates deeply. He reminds us that God is never distant from the people. In Pacific life, God's presence is felt not in separation, but in shared life, in communal meals, in stories told together, in waiting alongside one another, in pain and in celebration. Hope, he says, is something we carry together as a community. This is Advent, God drawing near to our humanity, not in perfection, but in presence.

Reflection: Advent in Our Lives

Advent is not about waiting perfectly. It is about faithful waiting in the midst of real life.

God meets us,

- in our weakness
- in our doubts
- in our imperfect preparations

But God also meets us,

- in family meals and friends' visits
- in quiet reflection
- in everyday blessings

Think again of that Tongan grandmother's feast. It may be messy. It may involve a little panic. But it is full of life, full of hope, full of joy.

And in the same way, each of us has our own story. Some stories feel full and loud right now. Some feel quiet, fragile, or unfinished. Some carry grief and loss. Some carry gratitude and celebration. Many of us carry all of these together.

That is exactly how God's joy enters our lives, not in perfection, but in presence. Not only in our mess, but also in our happiness. This is a deep spiritual truth.

Emmanuel. God with us, is here in all of it. Even in silence, even when we do not know what to pray, God hears the desire of your heart. Your story matters to God. Your waiting matters. Your joy matters. Your pain matters.

Application: Living Advent Joyfully

So, what does this mean for us today?

1. **Notice God in the ordinary**

Pay attention this week to God's presence in simple moments, in meals, conversations, laughter, and silence.

2. **Offer God your humanity**

Bring everything to God, your weakness, your doubts, your joys, your fears. Nothing is too small or too messy for God.

3. **Rejoice with confidence**

Rejoice not because life is perfect, but because God's nearness is real. Rejoice because God delights in you exactly as you are.

Call to Rejoice

So today, let us rejoice

- not because life is perfect,
- not because we have no doubts,
- not because our preparations are flawless

But because

God draws near. God is faithful. God meets us in our humanity, our mess, and our joy. God is Emmanuel, with us.

Let us lift our hearts with joy. **Rejoice, for the God who draws near meets us in our humanity**
