

Newly baptized Arianna is free to reject God.

We will all do our best to prevent that, of course: her parents and godparents and new church family all make hefty promises today to shepherd her toward Jesus, to encourage her to accept his welcome, to take up his yoke, to learn his gentle way to live, his humble way to God.

Her grandmother will teach her the art of altar preparation and her godfather will teach her new and creative ways to pray.

Her church community will welcome her to worship and Sunday School and Vacation Bible School and confirmation, all designed to teach her the gentle way of Jesus, and when she learns it, she will be free to crawl, walk, run, pedal, dash, drift or drive away.

She wouldn't be the first.

Jesus laments the rejection of his entire generation.

Both he and John the Baptist, as opposite as a wedding and a funeral, a teetotaler and a lush, are equally spurned by those who hear their songs but refuse to sing along.

Jesus gets frustrated.

As my friend Pastor Bob Klonowski points out, *Jesus needs a vacation.*

*He has been traveling around the cities of Galilee, and has experienced little but rejection.*

*Finally, in v. 16, Jesus blows his top: "To what shall I compare this generation?*

*You are like a bunch of children."*

*He tells all those cities that have rejected him that on the Judgment Day, when God finally gives them what they deserve, it will be no better for them than it was for Sodom.*

Jesus doesn't sound very gentle or humble of heart.

Jesus himself sounds like a cranky, overtired child ready to take his flute and go home because he doesn't get his way.

So, Arianna, when you want no part of the gentle way of Jesus, Jesus himself should understand.

The good news, the gospel for today, is really what happens next.

*At that time Jesus said... two things.*

First, he turned to God and said "thank you."

Next, he turned to those who had rejected him and said, "y'all come."

At the point of exhaustion and exasperation, Jesus prayed, with gratitude, and then started playing his flute again.

Jesus thanked God for the very thing that was irritating him, the grace of God somehow hidden inside the rejection that had left him so weary and burdened, then realized (as someday Arianna also will) that he was not alone.

The people around him, or more precisely the people not around him, were beaten up and burdened down too.

Those who were rejecting both his flute and John's bugle had long had the music stolen from their souls and had either forgotten how to dance and to cry or had been rendered too fearful to risk it.

There was no song under the imperial thumb of Rome.

There was no room to dance in the stifling confines of contemporary religious sensibilities.

There was no freedom under the yoke of the oppressor, whether that is the law of occupying Rome or the complicated and daunting interpretations of the teachers of law of God. These people needed a new way, or what would then be called a new *yoke*, a new framework for life that didn't weigh people down but lifted them up and let them truly live.

The very next chapter illustrates what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus' hungry disciples pluck grain on the sabbath and get called on the carpet for working; then Jesus heals a man's withered hand on the sabbath and the authorities file the papers to give him the death penalty.

Somehow resting on the sabbath had become extremely hard work.

And that is what happens in our human predicament: even the very vanguards of our freedom become the shackles that restrict and restrain us.

The magic substances that clear our minds and set us free from the stresses of the day become the addictions that enslave us and unravel our lives.

The laws that protect our basic freedoms become twisted into a tangled system that chokes the very justice it seeks to uphold and defend.

The credit that frees us to make the emergency purchase shackles us with debt and a rising APR.

The car and the condo that signal our independence and success require payments, a parking sticker, maintenance, and upkeep that suck away our time and money while also tightening the grip of a larger system that bails out banks, squeezes out homeowners, and feeds an insatiable addiction to foreign oil that leaves America anything but free.

The Blackberry that frees me to stay connected all the time becomes a handcuff that forces me to stay connected all the time.

Even the teaching of God, the Torah written to keep the liberated people of Israel free from slavery, becomes for Paul the taskmaster that keeps him imprisoned in the guilt and despair of sin and death.

Who will rescue him from his body of death?

Who will set us free from all that shackles and shames and worries and withers us?

*In holy baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The wailing of Good Friday and the flute of Easter continue to offer an ongoing melody of hope for any and all who dare to listen.

Arianna, child of God, will be free to walk away, but she will also be free to stay and dance.

Because God is not like the other insecure powers of empire political and financial, God allows room for rejection without recrimination.

We are free to choose, to sing along with Jesus or not.

Like all of us, Arianna is free to say no to God, and she is also free to say yes.

Like all of us, I suspect, Arianna will do both.

At different times, sometimes at the very same time, she will both welcome and spurn the tender invitation of Jesus.

She will accept and reject the yoke that is easy, the burden that is so light that it actually lifts her.

The good news, however, is that our rejection doesn't shackle Jesus.

When he is reduced to exasperation, he prays and then plays his flute again.

When he is crucified, the grave itself prays and returns him as an offering to God, and he rises to play his flute again.

And, gently and persistently, he keeps on inviting Arianna and the rest of us to come with him.