



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2017

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

This Sunday of Advent is a day for rejoicing. In most years, it is the midway point in this season of waiting and preparation. However, this year we are already more than half way through Advent. The fourth week of Advent begins next Sunday but ends at the Christmas Eve Masses later that day. Today, we rejoice, not because Christmas is nearly here, but because of what God has done, and is doing, for his people. Because it is not always easy to perceive God at work in our lives, today's Scripture readings will help us find reasons for rejoicing.

The Jews who returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon confronted the overwhelming loss of their former lives. As they confronted the consequences of their faithlessness in the past, they struggled with despair, wondering if God had abandoned them. When Isaiah first spoke the words of today's First Reading, he addressed a people facing the daunting task of rebuilding their shattered lives and community. Isaiah told the people that God had anointed him to bear glad tidings to them; his words were full of promise, assurance, and hope. His poor, broken-hearted people were assured of God's favor. Isaiah spoke with great joy as he described God's promises of salvation, justice, and renewed growth. Although the people could not see God at work in their bleak circumstances, Isaiah promised them that God would help them restore their lives. Isaiah's hopeful words rallied the people to begin rebuilding.

The Christians in Thessalonica were not without their own problems. Like other early Christian communities, they faced persecution for their beliefs. They also struggled with questions of faith and growing doubts as they realized that Jesus would not return for them as quickly as they had expected. Paul reminded them that they had reason for rejoicing in all circumstances. God was at work in their lives. Their task was to remain steadfast in faith and to be open to God's spirit. Paul insisted that as they waited in faith, God would make them holy so that they would be ready for Christ's return. Their transformation is guaranteed by God's faithfulness.

Today's Gospel again features John the Baptist. According to the evangelist John, John the Baptist's identity and mission were a puzzle to the religious authorities of his day. They were uncertain of who he was and what he was doing. John the Baptist answered that he was neither the Messiah nor one of the Prophets. He was the messenger whom Isaiah foresaw as the one who would announce the coming of the Christ. John was acting for God, getting the people ready to receive God's anointed one. The religious authorities rejected John's prophetic mission and missed an opportunity for great rejoicing. God was at work in John: the coming of salvation was almost upon them.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

God is the joy of my soul.

- The third section of the Book of Isaiah was written shortly after Israel's return from exile.
- Today's passage connects anointing and being filled with the Spirit of God by using vocabulary similar to the servant songs in Second Isaiah.
- The prophet proclaims a year of jubilee when debts are forgiven and land is returned to its original owner.

Responsorial Psalm: Luke 1: 46-48, 49-50, 53-54 My soul rejoices in God, my Savior.

Reading II: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Do not stifle the spirit.

- At the end of the First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul gives a series of directions to the faithful.
- Paul advises the Thessalonians to pray and give thanks without ceasing.
- The community is instructed to test everything and encourage that which is good.

Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Prepare the way of the Lord!

- John's Gospel uses words from Isaiah 40 to identify John the Baptist as the one who prepares the way for the new exodus and return from exile.
- The priests and Levites ask, "Why then do you baptize?" Baptism was a form of initiation for Gentile converts to Judaism.
- John uses this opportunity to bear witness to the one who will come, who will baptize not in water but in the Spirit.

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The Question of a Lifetime

Who are you?" That question may be asking for the most basic information possible, or it could be requesting a much deeper response that can only be answered by an entire lifetime. A lot depends on the context. The question is different when asked during a social event or at a doctor's office. When you appear at a school to pick up a child, there's a protective, legal reason for the question. If you are found walking the halls at the White House without a name tag, blocking traffic by holding up a sign in a busy intersection, or walking uninvited to the pulpit during Sunday Mass at the cathedral, it has other implications. In the latter cases, the question could well be stated as, "Just who do you think you are?" The tone implied in the last one is quite possibly the way the priests and Levites were talking to John.

Today's Gospel tells us that religious leaders from Jerusalem (think the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) went to find John the Baptist and asked, "Who are you?"

What on earth made John begin the dialogue by saying "I am not the Christ." It seems that John had only one thing on his mind. He was so focused on the coming of the Messiah that the first thing he thought of saying was not "I am the son of Zachariah," or "I'm a preacher," or "I'm a guy with an unusual diet and odd taste in clothes." No, John simply said, "I am not the Christ."

The ensuing interrogation makes it sound as if the officials thought they might be talking to a nut case. Picture them glancing at one another, subtly signaling who should ask the next question. One raises his eyebrows and asks, "So, then, are you Elijah? You know, the prophet who flew out of the world in a fiery chariot?" When John says, "No, I am not," the next inquirer, trying for all the world to look as if he's taking the question seriously himself, says, "Are you Moses, the Prophet?" John's quick "No," seems to have aimed at telling them to stop the games. So, they get serious: "Important people in Jerusalem have sent us to ask this. What should we tell them?"

We can almost picture John thinking, "Well, this is my chance. I'll tell them something they have to ponder and perhaps it will get through to them." So, he quotes Isaiah, "I am the voice crying out, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' "

John's interrogators refused to take the bait. John was ready to involve them in a discussion of what God was doing in their midst. Instead, they brought the question back to his identity and qualifications as a person preaching hope and change. "If you aren't the Messiah or Elijah or Moses, why are you riling up the people?" John met them at their level. If they weren't going to let their spiritual curiosity be piqued beyond suspicion of him, all he could say is, "You've not seen anything yet!"

This interaction implies that John had nothing to say about himself that did not relate to the coming Christ. From what we hear in the rest of the Gospels, that's a pretty accurate thumbnail portrait of this Advent prophet. He knew who he was as someone permeated by grace, impelled by the Spirit of God.

This Third Sunday of Advent presents us with lots of possibilities for our pondering. On one hand, we might hear these readings as an invitation to introspection. They invite us to take the time to ask our ourselves when and how God's spirit has welled up in us, confirming our faith and moving us to say "Yes" to God, the future and the vocation we have received as Christians.

Getting in touch with our own sense of call is an important form of prayer as it both reminds us of past moments of grace and attunes us to those to come. Today's readings also offer us criteria for discernment about the messages we hear in our world today. John awoke something in his people, and the religious leaders were concerned about it. We are surrounded by attention-getting calls to think and do, to buy or believe different messages. How do we discern?

Today's readings offer at least three criteria for knowing what is of God — in ourselves and others. Isaiah tells us that God's spirit consistently moves on behalf of people who are left behind, the poor, brokenhearted and immobilized. Paul tells us that one essential mark of true believers is the joy that comes from knowing how good God is. John's testimony tells us that those moved by God always point beyond themselves.

The question we are left with from today's readings is, "How does your care for others, your joy and your awareness of God tell others who you are?"