

Third Sunday of Advent (A)

Good morning, and a blessed Gaudete Sunday to you! If you don't know what "gaudete" means, ask a Catholic over 70. I'm not going to tell you... I trust you DO know that our Third Sunday of Advent is a little different from the other three. That rose-colored candle symbolizes that we're past the half-way mark in our anticipation of Christmas. And so if you look in the missalette, the Entrance Antiphon quotes from Phillipians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!" Our opening prayer speaks of joy and rejoicing. Our first reading, describing the marvels of what the coming of God will be like, uses the words joy, joyful, rejoice, rejoicing -- six times!

I hope that the word "rejoice" does describe your mood and the mood of your household as we get closer to Christmas. However, we all know that this is not the case for everyone. For some it's a headache; for some it's an uncertain time, or a painful time. For many it brings back hard memories. Saturday afternoon I prayed with a family at Children's who were taking their 4-month old baby off life support -- little Angel. I tell you, he was beautiful, just beautiful -- delicate fingers and toes, curly black hair. The only way you could really tell he was sick was because of the needles and tubing, and machines that he was hooked up to. As we prayed, his family just sobbed and held his hand... I couldn't help imagining -- or just trying to imagine -- what Christmas would be like for Angel's family this year, and for some years to come.

I mention this to you not only because of what I experienced today, but also because our gospel today begins with a note like that. Maybe you never spent much time thinking about it. What was going on in the life of John the Baptist, at the beginning of our gospel? He was in prison! When we heard from him in last week's gospel, we read from chapter three, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, at the time John baptizes Jesus. John was bold, confident, full of passion, with words of power; a real herald and messenger of the One to Come. And I'm sure it's a bit heady when the crowds come to you, even out in the desert; when you can speak boldly to power; when people respond and publicly repent. But in today's gospel, there's some time that has gone by -- we're in the 11th chapter now. John is not only in prison but he's uncertain...searching for answers. Perhaps it was his incarceration that caused him to doubt himself, along with Jesus. Prison can do that. Or perhaps John was becoming disillusioned when it seemed that Jesus was NOT emerging as the figure of power he had heralded, the judge whose "axe was at the roots of the trees," the one who would "burn the chaff in unquenchable fire." So he has his disciples ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another?"

I think it might be a good thing to ponder who this Jesus is whom we wait for. You see, it's not just John the Baptist who had his doubts or misunderstandings. As we know too, the apostles also misunderstood who Jesus was -- many of them expected a Messiah who would liberate their country from the Romans. And none of them understood -- ahead of time -- how suffering and death could possibly fit into his picture. And so too, for us, we project our own expectations onto our understanding of Jesus, and of God, whom Jesus reveals. We think Jesus is someone that he is not. We fail to understand how Jesus shows us who God is. For instance, we sometimes grapple with the problem of evil in the world, and how a good God could allow the innocent to die or evil people to get away unpunished. We lose heart if we don't feel that God answers our prayers.

And sometimes it goes deeper than that. Sometimes there's an evil that was done *to us*, and we can't understand why God let that happen *to us*. So, a close loved one dies, or someone we loved and trusted betrays us. *"God, where were you! I can't really trust you anymore. Maybe you aren't really there..."* And it is especially damaging when this happens to a child, when a parent dies, or leaves; or when someone trusted abuses that child. I know there are people here today who have suffered through this. These things not only damage us, they undermine, sometimes fatally, our understanding of God, our relationship with God.

That's a lot to throw out there, I know. But ALL of us have things – maybe not these things, but things – that affect our ability to know Jesus. As so it is a vital question that John's disciples ask Jesus...though for us, the question might not be "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" but rather, "Jesus, who are you, really?"

You probably noticed that in our gospel today Jesus does not give a direct answer to John and his disciples. Instead, he tells the disciples only to tell John that "the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." And then he adds this great little line at the end: "And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." I love that last line... "Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." The one who finds no stumbling block in me... the one who really listens to my word, who really walks by my side, who really opens his mind and heart... the one who doesn't allow his own expectations to get in the way.

You see, the reality is that however old we are -- whether you're 63 or thereabouts, like me, or older -- or a parent with a young family -- or a young adult, or a child -- I'm sure that we have a personal understanding of who Jesus is. But that understanding is only *partial*. For some of us, it's WAY too partial...WAY too fragmented, WAY too shallow. Even for those of his time, those who actually MET Jesus, their understanding was too small. We all need to grow in our understanding of Jesus.

We do this through prayer. That is, we do this through talking with him, and listening to him. We do this by throwing our lives in with his; by following his path; by standing with the blind and the lame and the dying and the poor, and experiencing what he experienced.

And it's especially appropriate to do that in Advent – a time when we prepare ourselves to meet the Lord. And there's a really good way to do that; and it's why we get together today. Today, in a just few minutes, we'll do what he told us to do. We'll remember what he did for us -- how he gave his life for ours ... we'll take bread and wine, call upon the Holy Spirit, and actually share his Body and Blood offered for us. We'll have the opportunity to open our hearts to him, to talk with him and listen to him, to ask for his help and his grace and his presence in our lives.

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