

3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, CYCLE B

Isaiah 61: 1-2a, 10-11 + Luke 1: 46-50, 53-54 + 1 Thess. 5:16-24 + John 1: 6-8, 19-28
Holy Spirit Catholic Church: December 14, 2014

As human beings, we cannot live without hope.
We cannot live without something to look forward to.
Without hope, our hearts harden, and we slowly die in despair.
We may be alive and functioning, but without hope we are not truly living.

The Prophet Isaiah proclaims words of hope to a people who have lost all reason to hope. The people of Jerusalem and all of Judah are being held captive in Babylon, and their beloved temple and capital city have been burned to the ground. They have hung up their harps for they no longer have reason to sing; instead they weep over all they have lost.

Isaiah stirs up the dying embers of their hope into a mighty flame by assuring them that the God who saved them from slavery in Egypt and did such mighty deeds in the desert and led them into the Promised Land, will save them again, will bring liberty to these captives and heal their broken hearts.

The 61st chapter of Isaiah proclaimed today dates to the period immediately after the return of the people from exile in Babylon. God made a way home for a people who had been imprisoned in exile, but now they stare forlornly at the ruins of Jerusalem, wondering how they will ever rebuild their temple, their city, and their lives. The stirring words and beautiful images spoken by Isaiah strengthen their hope so they might begin again.

We have even more reason than Isaiah and his people for hope. The coming of the promised Messiah in history immeasurably confirms and strengthens our hope. As the promised Messiah, as Hope enfleshed, Jesus reveals to us that God is not far off, but is already in our midst.

Thus, hope is the reason for this Season of Advent. All our hopes are rooted in the Coming One, the Messiah and Lord, who frees us from sins that enslave us, who is the Light scattering the darkness of despair, the One who heals our hurting hearts. The challenge remains, though, to recognize the Messiah in our midst.

Like the priests and Levites and Pharisees sent from Jerusalem to question John the Baptist, we do not recognize the Messiah in our midst. The problem is not that He does not come, for he keeps on coming in mysterious and hidden ways by the working of the Holy Spirit. The problem is we do not recognize his coming.

You may have heard the following story about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. The monks did not talk with one another; there were no new, young monks; and people had stopped coming to the monastery for spiritual solace and direction.

In the woods that surrounded the monastery a rabbi lived in a small hut. Occasionally, the monks would see the rabbi walking in the woods, and, almost hypnotically, they would say to one another, "*The rabbi walks in the woods.*"

The abbot was greatly distraught at the decline of the monastery. He had prayed and pondered over the situation and admonished the mood and behavior of the monks--all to no avail.

One day he saw the rabbi walking in the woods and decided to ask his advice. He walked up behind the rabbi.

The rabbi turned, and when the abbot and the rabbi faced one another, both began to weep. The sorrow of the situation affected them deeply.

The abbot knew he did not have to explain the decline of the monastery.

He merely asked, "*Can you give me some direction so the monastery will thrive again?*"

The rabbi said, "*One of you is the Messiah.*"

Then he turned and continued to walk in the woods.

The abbot returned to the monastery. The monks had seen him talking to the rabbi who walks in the woods. They asked, "*What did the rabbi say?*"

"*One of us is the Messiah,*" the abbot said the words slowly, almost incredulously.

The monks began talking to one another. "*One of us? Which one? Is it Brother John? Or perhaps it is Brother Andrew? Could it even be the abbot?*"

Slowly, things began to change at the monastery.

The monks began to look for the Messiah in each other, and listen to each other's words for the Messiah's voice.

Soon new, younger monks joined, and people returned to the monastery for spiritual solace and direction.

If we live with this consciousness that the Messiah is in our midst, then our world will be transformed.

If we live with this awakening alertness, with a new level of attention to others, and treat each person as if he or she were Christ Himself coming to us, think of what would happen. Racism would be eradicated from our midst. Violence would be replaced by peace. Torture would be no more, not only the terror of water boarding, but emotional torture as well: gossip and slander which rip apart another's reputation.

If we choose to live with the awareness that the Messiah may be coming to us in the most unlikely of people, we can then be a saving instrument of hope. We can joyfully bring glad tidings to the poor by our generous gifts and by working for justice. We can heal those whose hearts are broken by listening to their sorrow with compassion, and walking with them in their pain. We can release those held captive by fear or doubt or despair.

This new state of heightened awareness means putting technology in its proper place, pulling it away from the center of our attention, by lifting our heads from our glowing screens and becoming more aware of those around us.

I'd like to call this heightened state of awareness, "*John the Baptist consciousness.*" Humble like him, we know who we are not---we are not the Savior, Christ is. The world does not revolve around us, it revolves around Him. With this kind of awareness we know who we are and what we are about—we are to prepare the way for the Lord by welcoming Him present in others.

Alert to welcome the coming Messiah, we find we are more alive than ever before. Living to serve Christ in others, loving Him present there, we discover a newfound joy. A joy that is much different than the fleeting nature of pleasure, a joy that is a gift of the Spirit, empowering us to rejoice always.

So, we rejoice with the Blessed Virgin Mary, for like her, we are pregnant with Hope, because God has done great things for us and will continue to do so. We sing with Mary because God in Christ has lifted up we who are lowly to new life, in Him and with Him and through Him.

Fr. Joseph A. Jacobi