

**Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Advent, Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

December 11, 2016

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

On this Gaudete Sunday, we rejoice because the Lord is near. Most of us grow a little impatient at this time of year with all of the hustle and bustle of preparing for Christmas.

The key here is to be patient because we know that the Lord is near and we will soon rejoice in celebrating His birth. Today's readings show that waiting is not without its value. Saint James, in a typically down-to-earth way, draws an example from nature: farmers are almost by definition patient individuals. They know that everything takes time: you don't plant a seed into the ground today and expect the appearance of precious fruit tomorrow; the felling of a tree may take hours, the growth of a tree takes years. It's a law that applies to all growth, especially growth in friendship, including growth in friendship with God.

Christian waiting is an active rather than a passive affair: while placing all our trust in God, we act as though everything depends on us. Today's readings suggest that there are advantages in this active waiting. It teaches us our limitations, and so makes us alive to our need of God. The prophet Isaiah, speaking to his people in the grim days of exile, assures them that a time is coming when the desert will be transformed into a carpet of flowers and when human disabilities will be healed. While waiting, they must trust in God.

The Gospel suggests that when our waiting includes a genuine openness to God's designs, we often find that our God is a God of surprises. John the Baptist spent his life waiting and preparing for the coming of the Messiah. He continued even when he was languishing in Herod's dark subterranean dungeon. He had always imagined the Messiah would be mighty, and would pass fierce judgement on his enemies. But Jesus was so different. You can sense the anguish in John's voice as he tells his friends to go and ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?" It's as though he is wondering if his whole life has been in vain.

Yet even now he seems to preserve a spirit of openness, a readiness to trust in God. The reward is indeed a surprise; his friends bring back startling news: those who are deaf hear, those who are blind see, sick people are healed, "the Good News is proclaimed to the poor." We have seen the fulfilment of those words of Isaiah, they say, we have witnessed God's boundless love at work in Jesus; if he is not our Messiah, then no one ever could be. John's waiting had not been in vain.

Saint John the Baptist is a prominent figure in the Gospel readings of Advent. As he is described in these Gospel passages, John the Baptist comes across as an odd fellow, but then again so were all the prophets in their own unique way. John was the last of the prophets as well as the greatest of all the prophets. So, being the greatest of them, perhaps he was also the oddest of them all.

The Gospels tell us that he was a cousin of Jesus. Our Gospel from last Sunday told us that John was wandering about the desert of Judea preaching, that he wore camel's hair for a tunic and that he lived on a steady diet of locusts. He does seem to be a rather odd cousin for Jesus to have, but I think all of us can admit to having our fair share of odd cousins.

So yes John the Baptist was an odd fellow. But what makes him most odd was the message that he came to bring: repent of your sins, turn away from doing wrong.

That message got him in trouble.

Our opening from Matthew's Gospel tells us that John is in prison. We know from Mark's Gospel that John the Baptist challenged Herod for his sinful life, and in response Herod had him arrested and thrown into prison. Mark's Gospel tells us that Herod was perplexed by John. Apparently Herod also found him to be an odd fellow.

John the Baptist seemed so odd because of his message, because he sought the Truth. He seemed odd in the eyes of the world that had lost sight of what was true. He seemed odd to a world that lost sight of what was good. He seemed odd to a world that was preoccupied with sin, that was blinded by sin.

It was to this world that John the Baptist came preaching that God would come to save His people.

John the Baptist became the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that said, "behold I am sending my messenger ahead of you; He will prepare the way before you."

St. John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Christ. Christ would be the fulfillment of what was also written in the prophecy of Isaiah from our first reading. Christ is the one about whom it was written: Here is your God, He comes to save you. He will open the eyes of the blind and He will clear the ears of the deaf.

Christ came among us as the Savior to heal us, both body and soul.

When John asked Jesus if He is indeed the one about whom the prophet Isaiah wrote, Jesus responded: go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.

Christ affirmed that He was the one whom Isaiah had foretold and that he was accomplishing all that Isaiah said the savior would do. He came to heal us, to heal us of our greatest affliction, our sins. Christ came to release from our bondage to sin.

Remember that the beginning of the Gospel today opens with John the Baptist in prison. That image of John held captive in prison: that's a perfect image for this Advent season. It's a perfect image all of us.

Just as John was sitting in prison, so too was the whole human race, waiting for the Savior, waiting in bondage, bound, chained by sin, because

that is precisely what sin does to us: it binds us, it chains us, holds us captive and restricts our freedom. Sin takes away our freedom to seek God and do what is good.

So long as there is sin in our lives, we are bound by it and we are not truly free. Yet, we are not doomed to perpetual bondage, for we have a way out. We have a way to be released from our captivity to sin.

Seeking the Lord in the Sacrament of Confession can release us from the captivity of sin. Seeking the Lord's mercy by confessing our sins can break the bondage of sin.

The Lord came to heal us, body and soul. He heals our soul when we ask for his mercy, for our Redeemer comes to save us from our sins. He comes to feed us with the joy of His loving presence in the Eucharist. In these two weeks before the Lord comes at Christmas, allow Him to heal you of sins, allow Him to free you from what binds and burdens you, so that when he does come at Christmas we can welcome with the peace and joy that only freedom can bring.

May God give us this grace. Amen.