

[Opinion](#)
[Spirituality](#)



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As we listen to today's Gospel, we might wonder what happened to John the Baptist. Last Sunday, we heard a Gospel about John where he was the one who was going to prepare the way of the Lord, out in the desert preaching, gathering followers after him, a powerful voice. People thought he was Elijah who had come back. Now today, John seems to have lost his faith. He's in prison and he must feel very desolate and alone.

Third Sunday of Advent

[Dec. 15, 2019](#)

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

Psalms 146

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

He sends his disciples to Jesus, the one he was proclaiming. "Are you the one who is to come? Or do we look for someone else?" John, I think it's understandable after being thrown in a dungeon, waiting to be executed, and not seeing anything follow from his preaching, and as far as he knew, not much from Jesus. He was losing faith. We might be shocked by that — someone like John, this powerful voice in the wilderness, having this dark night of the soul, but it happens.

You may have read about St. Teresa of Calcutta, Mother Teresa. The last years of her life were a terrible agony for her. It seemed like darkness. She had no sense of God's loving presence, but she persevered, of course. But when Jesus sends his disciples back to John, what is he telling John and telling us?

He's telling us, in fact, that Jesus is the one. He is the one that God has prepared to send to become part of the human family, to show us the way to bring about the reign of God.

When Jesus sends back his message, he sends it back in a way that when John hears it, he will fully understand because at the very beginning of Jesus' public life, he had gone into the synagogue at Nazareth. (You may remember this.) He had been in the desert fasting, came back, and went to Nazareth, his hometown, and went to the synagogue. They gave him the scroll of the Scriptures to read. He unrolled the scroll until he got to the place — Isaiah 61, where the prophet says: "The Spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to proclaim good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to give the blind new sight, to proclaim God's year of favor." (When the fullness of God's love and goodness captures our whole world and the reign of God breaks forth.)

After he rolls up the Scripture and gives it back to the leader of the synagogue, he sits down. Luke says, "All eyes are fixed on him. This day this passage is fulfilled even as you listen." That's the message he sends back to John. "Good news is proclaimed to the poor. The blind receive new sight. The downtrodden are set free and justice reigns. The fullness of God's reign breaks forth into our world."

In fact, our first lesson today, an earlier part of Isaiah, proclaims the same thing. "Say to those who are disheartened, be strong, and do not fear. See, your God comes. He comes to bring you God's saving love. The eyes of the blind will be opened. The ears of the deaf unsealed. Then the lame will leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy, for water will spring up in the wilderness and streams in the desert."

Isaiah, again, is proclaiming what happens when God's reign breaks into our world. Everything comes into fullness of life. God's goodness begins to penetrate into all the hearts of everyone. The reign God breaks forth. It was beginning, Jesus says, when he began to preach in that synagogue in Nazareth. "This day this Scripture passage is fulfilled as you listen." So Jesus is telling John and telling us that the reign of God is ready to break forth, but we have to listen. We have to follow the words of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus. We have to let him show us the way to make this reign of God happen. And he does show us the way — reaching out to the poor. In Advent, we're waiting for Jesus.

One of the ways that Jesus comes into our midst is through people who need our help, people who are fleeing violence, pleading to come to a place of solace and peace, people on our streets who are hungry — Jesus is asking us to reach out to them. That's the reign of God breaking forth.

I think it's particularly interesting and challenging, I guess, when we hear Isaiah in our first lesson today talk not only about the eyes of the blind will be opened, ears of the deaf unsealed and so on, but he goes on to show what happens to our planet. "The desert will be glad and blossom. It will bloom with abundant flowers, like crocus, and rejoice with song of joy. The splendor of Lebanon will be given to it. The magnificence of Mt. Carmel and Sharon, they will see the Lord, their glory, the majesty of our God."

Isaiah is talking about our planet. It's a very timely message for us now. In the reign of God, our planet will be restored. Right now, we're damaging it to the point where it may not be able to recover. I found it very inspiring a few weeks ago when Pope Francis was in St. Peter's Square for one of his public audiences. As he was making the circle through the crowd, he stopped and spoke with a teenage girl, Greta Thunberg. He thanked her for what she was doing to save our planet. She thanked him for the letter he has written about how we need to restore this planet to its fullness of life.

So as we listen today to the Gospel, we hear this message of Jesus once more proclaimed to John the Baptist, but also to us. If we want to make this reign of God come forth, then we have to follow this way of Jesus — reach out to the poor, bring good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, bring the brokenhearted new life, bring justice, and also work to prevent our planet from being destroyed. It's all part of the message of God and it can happen.

That's what these Scripture passages are telling us, but it needs all of us who say we are followers of Jesus to follow his way to bring fullness of life to others, to bring our own planet to a fullness of life. As we prepare for Christmas, this is one of the ways that we must look forward to the coming of Jesus to make all of this happen through our cooperating with him and bringing him his reign of peace and justice and love and fullness of life into our world.

Editor's note: *This homily was given Dec. 14 at St. Ambrose Church, Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*

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