

Advent 3 2019

Today we observe the Third Sunday of Advent, filling us with a sense that the time is getting short and soon our joy will be complete in the celebration of Jesus' birth. But still we are waiting. Advent is the season of waiting and hoping and wishing for some assurance that God does indeed love us and that God is in control of our lives and the future.

But our Gospel lesson reminds us that Advent is also a season of impatience. Will everything come together the way we hope? Have we thought of everyone, will our gifts be appropriate, adequate, appreciated? Are we doing enough for those for whom this will not be a happy time of celebration the poor, the grieving, and the discouraged? Always in the back of our mind is that dull fear that we have forgotten something that Christmas will not unfold the way we anticipate.

This morning John the Baptist makes his second scheduled appearance of the Advent season. But this time John comes to us from a prison cell, expressing none of the bravado and outrage we experienced last week, when we saw him as a fearless messianic herald, drawing crowds in the wilderness and rebuking the hypocrisy of the religious establishment.

In the eleventh chapter of Matthew John is no longer wild-eyed, assertive, confident, but rather confused, discouraged, some might even speculate depressed. No longer free to wander unfettered through the wilderness, John is a caged creature and from the gloom of a prison cell we hear John's inquiry of Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" [Matthew 11: 3]

I have never been in prison, but, as a Priest, I have visited prisoners. Once you go behind the locked gates, you experience an oppression that is unforgettable. Prisoners experienced a form of blindness, as their vision is limited to the size of their cell. Generally, they know only what they are told. Such was John's situation after King Herod imprisoned him.

But despite his isolation John did receive news about Jesus, at least enough to make him wonder if he had backed the wrong horse. Was Jesus truly the one who would come after John, whom he had boldly proclaimed was more powerful than he? Was Jesus the one or should John and all of Israel look for another?

I find the question John asked at the heart of a lot of unrest and disconnection in our world today. I think many good people, Christian people, share John's

pondering. Is Jesus the one, or should we look for another? The limits we place on our vision and expectation have a profound impact on whether Christ comes and makes a home in our hearts at this blessed season. And a big reason why so many question where God and Jesus are in their lives is that they have not been trained, their faith has not been formed, and, as a result, they cannot see God at work in the everyday dimensions of their lives.

Each week we gather in community, hear the Scripture lessons read, try to follow the sermon, sing the hymns, and receive the Lord as he comes to us through Holy Communion. Perhaps we even experience God in this sacred place.

But do we reflect our faith in the economy of our lives, in the decisions we make every day? Does the simple fact that Jesus is our Lord have any impact on how we live out our responsibility as a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend, an employee, a volunteer, or a citizen of this great nation?

To revisit one of my favourite clichés: If you were on trial and the charge was that you were a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?

What are our expectations? Do we see the hand of God in the world today? Do we see any indication that Jesus was reality-based when he spoke of the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the outcasts of society restored, the deaf hearing, the dead being restored to life, and the poor having good news brought to them? [Matthew 11: 5]

I think the similar question is appropriate for us to raise on this Third Sunday of Advent. Are we capable of identifying God's activity outside the contexts of the stained-glass windows and the organ music we tend to associate with where we experience the critical dimensions of our faith? If Sunday after Sunday there is no connection between what we do in church and what happens in our Monday to Friday world, is it possible that something is missing?

When I was a little boy, I was terribly excited as Christmas approached. I always had a list and some of the things on the list I actually received. But none of those desired gifts are still in my life, but the joy of Christmas remains. Like most of you, I have grown up and I no longer make a Christmas list. I suppose that is, sadly, a sign of becoming an adult.

Many of you have grown up only recently. You now have the house you always wanted, the job or career that is fulfilling. I hope many of you have that life partner and family that was always on your wish list. Perhaps you have the car you always coveted and have taken some of the trips you hoped to take.

But is that all there is? Is this the totality of what you were waiting for? What do you do when you have everything you ever wanted ... and it is not enough? Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another? [Matthew 11: 3]

Advent calls us to make room in our hearts and our hectic pursuits for the coming of Christ, the Savior. Advent calls us to make it possible for Him to come and that means to smooth out some of the rough places that block his coming. There is a wonderful Christmas carol, Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne, that captures this Advent hope: O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee.

Advent teaches us to live with patient expectation. God begins with a tiny Child, born in humble surroundings, and then God works slowly and surely. Our task is to be watchful, to not lose hope, to see what God is doing all around us. Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let us cling to this hope, now and always.

AMEN.