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“Who are you?” That question may be asking for the most basic information possible, or it could be requesting a much deeper response that can only be answered by an entire lifetime. A lot depends on the context. The question is different when asked during a social event or at a doctor’s office. When you appear at a school to pick up a child, there’s a protective, legal reason for the question. If you are found walking the halls at the White House without a name tag, blocking traffic by holding up a sign in a busy intersection, or walking uninvited to the pulpit during Sunday Mass at the cathedral, it has other implications. In the latter cases, the question could well be stated as, “Just who do you think you are?” The tone implied in the last one is quite possibly the way the priests and Levites were talking to John.

Today’s Gospel tells us that religious leaders from Jerusalem (think the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) went to find John the Baptist and asked, “Who are you?”

What on earth made John begin the dialogue by saying “I am not the Christ.” It seems that John had only one thing on his mind. He was so focused on the coming of the Messiah that the first thing he thought of saying was not “I am the son of Zachariah,” or “I’m a preacher,” or “I’m a guy with an unusual diet and odd taste in

clothes.” No, John simply said, “I am not the Christ.”

The ensuing interrogation makes it sound as if the officials thought they might be talking to a nut case. Picture them glancing at one another, subtly signaling who should ask the next question. One raises his eyebrows and asks, “So, then, are you Elijah? You know, the prophet who flew out of the world in a fiery chariot?” When John says, “No, I am not,” the next inquirer, trying for all the world to look as if he’s taking the question seriously himself, says, “Are you Moses, the Prophet?” John’s quick “No,” seems to have aimed at telling them to stop the games. So, they get serious: “Important people in Jerusalem have sent us to ask this. What should we tell them?”

We can almost picture John thinking, “Well, this is my chance. I’ll tell them something they have to ponder and perhaps it will get through to them.” So, he quotes Isaiah, “I am the voice crying out, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord!’ ”

John’s interrogators refused to take the bait. John was ready to involve them in a discussion of what God was doing in their midst. Instead, they brought the question back to his identity and qualifications as a person preaching hope and change. “If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or Moses, why are you riling up the people?” John met them at their level. If they weren’t going to let their spiritual curiosity be piqued beyond suspicion of him, all he could say is, “You’ve not seen anything yet!”

This interaction implies that John had nothing to say about himself that did not relate to the coming Christ. From what we hear in the rest of the Gospels, that’s a pretty accurate thumbnail portrait of this Advent prophet. He knew who he was as someone permeated by grace, impelled by the Spirit of God.

This Third Sunday of Advent presents us with lots of possibilities for our pondering. On one hand, we might hear these readings as an invitation to introspection. They invite us to take the time to ask ourselves when and how God’s spirit has welled up in us, confirming our faith and moving us to say “Yes” to God, the future and the vocation we have received as Christians.

Getting in touch with our own sense of call is an important form of prayer as it both reminds us of past moments of grace and attunes us to those to come.

Today’s readings also offer us criteria for discernment about the messages we hear in our world today. John awoke something in his people, and the religious leaders

were concerned about it. We are surrounded by attention-getting calls to think and do, to buy or believe different messages. How do we discern?

Today's readings offer at least three criteria for knowing what is of God — in ourselves and others. Isaiah tells us that God's spirit consistently moves on behalf of people who are left behind, the poor, brokenhearted and immobilized. Paul tells us that one essential mark of true believers is the joy that comes from knowing how good God is. John's testimony tells us that those moved by God always point beyond themselves.

The question we are left with from today's readings is, "How does your care for others, your joy and your awareness of God tell others who you are?"

### **ISAIAH 61:1-2a 10-11**

The opening verse of this selection from Third Isaiah imitates the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah and will, in turn, be quoted by Jesus and be used to refer to John the Baptist. Scholars tell us that the Book of Isaiah is a compilation from at least three different authors who lived in three different eras. That shows us a little of how our scriptural tradition builds on itself. Key stories and passages are reworked from one age to the next to shed light on how God is active in any given moment of history. Today's selection from Isaiah 61 sheds a particular light on the other two readings and invites us to take a discerning look at our communal and personal life.

When the prophet says that the spirit of the Lord has come upon him and anointed him, he's using two distinct and complementary images, images we might take as contemplative and active. By saying that the spirit of the Lord has come upon him, Isaiah is talking about the state of his heart and soul. For Isaiah, God's command is not simply an outside authority demanding obedience; the love of God has inhabited him. This is similar to what Paul talks about in his letter to the Romans: God's very spirit is alive in him and moves him to pray, to cry out. That's the interior dimension of prophecy, it's the experience available to any beloved lover of God.

The second thing Isaiah says about himself is that God has anointed him. This refers to the traditional way of commissioning a king and to what we do in baptism, confirmation and ordination. This type of anointing signifies a vocation in the sense of being given a commission. To be anointed is to be sent in God's name.

When this passage is applied to John the Baptist, it comments on the question the authorities put to John: “Who are you?” John’s response intimated that he was a prophet. How are we to know who is genuinely a prophet and who is a charlatan, claiming divine sanction while actually motivated by lesser, potentially destructive motives?

The reading from Isaiah gives us a good basis for discernment. First, a genuine prophet will be carrying out God’s will, primarily on behalf of the marginalized, the poor or brokenhearted, the captives, people who are hopelessly indebted. Another indication in which Isaiah and Paul coincide is that the person who is of God will exhibit the joy that comes from knowing that the love of God is the ultimate driving force of the universe. While there is much to do, there is never a reason to despair. The person in touch with the spirit of God within her or himself will know that their task is to be part of preparing the way for the God who will institute justice and joyful praise among all people.

## **1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24**

Paul is winding down his letter to the Thessalonians. Like someone about to stand up and leave, he’s giving his final instructions. Paul leaves his community three commands about how to live. He’s not giving them moral instruction, but telling them what kind of an interior spirit they can have and develop because they know Christ. If they develop this spirit, morality will be a side issue, not unimportant, but subsumed in an integrated approach to life instead of a consideration of individual acts.

Anyone who thinks of Paul as a dour rule-giver has never meditated on this reading. Paul’s first injunction is “Rejoice always.” Paul says “always.” That indicates that rejoicing is not a mood or a fiesta activity, it’s not a prayer after communion, but an attitude. We can’t engender our own rejoicing, but we can cultivate it. Joy is not the same as pleasure. Pleasure is a fleeting sensation of liking something that generally “pleases” us. Pleasure is rooted in our senses: We can relish or appreciate what we hear, taste, smell, see or touch. Joy is a state of the soul. Joy is deeper than happiness or contentment. Happiness is always vulnerable to sorrow, loss, even pain. Contentment speaks of satisfaction with what is. Joy can coexist with sorrow and discontent. (Think of Pope Francis who exudes joy while he can express profound sadness about the hatred and violence he sees in the world around him.)

The joy of which Paul speaks is a fruit of faith in Christ and God's great love. Joy is an attitude that knows that no matter the circumstances of the moment, God's love is the one constant. If we want to think about joy, we might think about the way the Gospel of John presents Jesus' understanding of the events of his passion. Jesus speaks of his cross as "being lifted up," of death as the fullness of his vocation (12:32-33). What carried Jesus through the horror of those events was his inner awareness of God's faithfulness and profound delight in knowing God's love. That's what engenders the sort of joy Paul is talking about. We can "rejoice always" to the extent that we are aware of the power of God's love to give meaning to everything in our life.

Paul's other two injunctions are integral parts of the attitude of joy he has called the community to develop. He says, "Pray without ceasing." Obviously, he's not calling the entire community to the lifestyle of the Carmelites or even the Benedictines; we know that Paul didn't walk the road fingering a rosary. Praying always speaks of an attitude more than an activity. Ignatius of Loyola might refer to it as living a discerning life, always being aware of God's presence and our response. Finally, Paul says, "In all circumstances, give thanks." This, too, is an attitude as much as an activity. It is a call to develop an appreciation of everything that is, to discover the beauty in all that surrounds us. Going full circle, that sort of an approach to life cannot help but engender joy.

## **JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28**

Today's selection from the preface of the Gospel of John focuses on John the Baptist as the bridge from the eternal Word to the incarnate Word (1:1). In the plan of the Gospel writer, the beginning of the reading focuses on human history and God rather than on John (1:6-8). John is simply a witness, a testifier.

When the text says that John was sent from God, the word for *sent* is the root from which we get the word *apostle*. Thus, in the Gospel of John, the Baptist is the first apostle of the Christian Scriptures, the first one sent by God to testify to the light of Christ.

With the exception of Luke, the evangelists tell us nothing of John's background, and the purpose of Luke's information about Zachary and Elizabeth and John is designed much more to situate John in relation to Jesus than to give us genealogical facts. For all of the evangelists, the point is that John, the well-known and immensely popular

prophet-martyr, was not equal to Jesus. They can't tell the Gospel story without John, but they avoid letting him become the center of it.

The Gospel of John portrays John the Baptist as a person who knows very well who he is. Although the way the priests and Levites began to interrogate him may look like they are talking to a crazy person, John the Evangelist paints the scene to show that the only one in the scene who really knows himself is John the Baptist.

John the Evangelist makes a subtle comparison between John and his cross-examiners. He introduces the Baptist by saying he was sent by God. Then he says that the questioners and the Pharisees were also sent, but they were sent by the Jews from Jerusalem, the Levites and priests. That little fact asks each reader to face a crucial question: "Whose work are you doing?" It also leads to the difficult questions of human freedom: Life can seem very clear when somebody with "authority" tells us what to do; recognizing the will of God is riskier.

As is typical in John's Gospel, the story can be as deep as we are willing to allow it to be. On one level this presentation of John the Baptist presents the historical prophet as a man uniquely aware of who he was as a person called by God, not the Messiah. When we take it further, it invites us into the questions John had to answer for himself. How did God's spirit burn within him? For what had he been sent? And ultimately, how much was he willing to risk in carrying out his vocation? All of those implications came into play with the simple question the Jerusalem delegates put to John: "Who are you?"

## **Planning: 3rd Sunday of Advent**

By: Lawrence Mick

Today is known traditionally as Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, marking the half-way point through the Sundays of Advent. (This year it's closer to two-thirds of the way through the season.) Rose vestments may be used today if you have them, and the rose candle on the Advent wreath is lit today.

The first and second readings today proclaim a message of joy. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, "I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has

clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with her jewels.”

St. Paul commands us to “rejoice always.”

Between these two readings we have an unusual responsorial — not a psalm but the Cantic of Mary. The refrain easily connects the two readings: “My soul rejoices in my God.” If you know a good setting of the Magnificat, you could use it here, especially if it is composed in a responsorial structure. If your parish does not know at least one good setting of this cantic, it’s time to learn one or two. It’s one of the best songs we can use on any Marian feast as well as today. Planners should work with the parish musicians to see what is available in your hymnals or what other sources can be mined.

Some might raise a question about this emphasis on joy. If Advent is a time for lament, what are we doing rejoicing? The answer lies in the virtue of hope. We lament the various ways in which the kingdom has not yet come. But at the same time, we rejoice in the signs of the kingdom that are already in our midst.

Theologians speak of the “already” and the “not yet.” The kingdom has already come, as Jesus proclaimed, but it has not arrived in its fullness yet. So, we rejoice in what has come to pass while we still yearn and lament for what is still to come.

Planners could use the “already but not yet” format to compose petitions this week. Each petition could begin with a phrase like “We rejoice because ...” and then add “yet we yearn (or lament) because ... and so we pray ...” This could be used at any time during the year, of course, but it seems especially appropriate in this season.

Preachers could support this effort by reminding people of the “in-between” time in which we live, helping parishioners to understand Advent as remembering the first coming of Christ and yearning for the second coming.

## **Prayers: 3rd Sunday of Advent**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Today we are in the rhythm of both gratitude and yearning. Between the two, there is great space for hope. We are learning to be a patient people, continuing on, grateful but also impatient, in hope. We don't give up hoping just because some of the things we long for in God's reign of peace and justice have already happened. We're there, and yet we're not. So much remains unfinished; so many have not yet experienced what has been promised.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you were promised to those waiting for you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you were foretold as the coming anointed one: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you will come to us who yearn for you: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray, my friends, for the fulfillment of humanity's yearnings.

**Minister** The church is called to rejoice and be grateful, and yet we yearn because there is so much more to come ... so in hope and anticipation, we pray

- We have tasted peace, yet so many live in the midst of violence and war ... so in hope and anticipation, we pray
- We promote justice, but so many live without work, housing, healthcare or adequate education ... so in hope and anticipation, we pray
- We live in freedom, but so many are held captive by inequality, prejudice and lack of opportunity ... so in hope and anticipation, we pray
- There are signs of love around us, but we are a flawed, often unloving people ... so in hope and anticipation, we pray
- Our community is grateful for so much, but people among us are still sick, discouraged, dying and grieving ... so in hope and anticipation, we pray

**Presider** God of hope, we thank you and rejoice for all you have already done for us. We see your work in many ways and places. But our yearning is not yet satisfied, and there are those who have lost hope. Keep us mindful of your promises and ready to welcome your Son among us. We ask this in his holy name, Amen.

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