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“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (Matt 11:2).

Third Sunday of Advent

Isa 35:1-6a, 10; James 5:7-10; Matt 11:2-11

Times of crisis rouse people to look for leaders who can offer stability, renewed purpose and apparent progress. History shows us that good leaders are not always recognized in advance, only in hindsight when the outcome is known and they prove to be the ones we needed, rising to the occasion to meet their precise challenge.

In the meantime, uncertainty and controversy hold us in suspense. Pope Francis is for many the answer to prayer, the leader who will complete the promises of Vatican II and recover the mission of the church in the world. Others say the pope has taken the church off the rails and damaged its traditional authority.

Political crises and corruption pose serious questions about the future of the planet and the ability of our institutions to resolve conflict and avoid global conflagration. Candidates for high office compete to be the one chosen to imbue confidence and lead the way forward.

Today's Gospel suggests that similar uncertainties beset the ministry of Jesus from the outset. John the Baptist, the prophet sent to announce God's chosen one, had doubts about whether he had identified the right person. He had foretold a figure who would separate the good from the evil and baptize with wind and fire. Awaiting execution in Herod's prison, John heard reports that instead Jesus was offering forgiveness and mercy to sinners, welcoming outcasts and foreigners.

Jesus seeks to reassure John that the same Isaiah who had described his role to prepare the way for divine intervention had also described a messianic figure bringing healing and peace to a suffering world. Whether John was convinced and went to his death confident he had fulfilled his mission we are not told, but the Gospel writer witnesses to us that even in paradox and contradiction, God blesses history with what it needs most in any given time.

The entire Christmas story is filled with contradictions we have resolved in hindsight, but who would believe at the time that a child born in cave to parents who fled to protect him from murder, who grew up to proclaim God's justice and love before being crucified and erased from history, would today be celebrated as Savior of the world?

Gaudete Sunday affirms that God is source not just of happiness, that fleeting respite from life's uncertainties, but of joy, defined beyond wishing to be the possession of the good, "blessed assurance." God's promises are the very basis of reality, the bedrock of our existence, conceived in love, destined for love, the end of the story glimpsed in the middle; all things shall be well; do not be afraid. Whatever happens to us in this world's turmoil and temporality will not interdict our journey's end or the value of our sufferings to reveal God's glory.

John, born headless into eternity, was the greatest of the old prophets without knowing the importance of his role as precursor. But he was the first martyr of the new Covenant, and Jesus praises him as the greatest person in human history. Blessed are we to know just how God works in history, including our chaotic times, without being scandalized.

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