Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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"Among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he" (Matt 11:12).

***Gaudete* Sunday, Third Sunday of Advent**

Is 35:1-6a, 10; *Ps 146*; *Jas 5:7-10*; *Matt 11:2-11*

John the Baptist is the witness to the light. He is not the light, only the one who will introduce the light. John is like a figure walking toward us as the sun rises behind him. He is so backlit we can barely recognize his features, for he is less important than the brilliant source approaching us behind him.

John's shadow rolls over us. His message is a stern warning: repent, get ready, change your heart and your ways so you can receive the light that is coming behind me, like the dawn of God's arrival.

We call this third Sunday of Advent *Gaudete* Sunday, Latin for "to rejoice," because the promise is near, just 14 days from now. Something wonderful is about to happen that will change everything. Most of all, we will be changed. The former limits of our existence, the certainty of death that so troubled the ancient philosophers and gave rise to religion as a wager against mortality, are defeated.

John's message is revealed as the darkness before dawn, the silent interval before the real music begins. His message is like a prelude, preparing us for the symphony itself. This is God's offer of eternal life, fulfilling the universe, then transcending it with a fresh pulse in our DNA, a new destiny revealed by the One who is coming, for he is the Light.

Yet John, the greatest prophet and the greatest person ever born, barely understood what he witnessed to on the banks of the Jordan when he pointed to Jesus. Later, sitting in a dank cell awaiting decapitation, he would send messengers to ask Jesus if he, John, had failed his mission, wasted his short life on an illusion, a baptism of water only.

But something wonderful was happening. In Jesus, God's infinite gift of mercy was being poured out on anyone who turned toward God to receive it. The reign of God opened the doors of salvation to everyone. Jesus rejoices that the poor and the simple, God's *anawim*, were the first to respond to this gift. They had heard his preaching and believed in the gracious welcome God was extending to everyone, and they were taking heaven by storm.

John had proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, a figure of awesome power, sent to pass judgment. What John did not recognize until the end of his life, facing martyrdom, was that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, but was not coming to judge and punish, rather was coming to forgive and heal God's people.

Jesus again proclaims God's compassion by his coming to us in this season of expectation and repentance. Advent is our time to storm heaven. Christmas is our time to receive God in human vulnerability and humility, filled with compassion, opening the heart of God to all, especially sinners like us.

This is the joy of the Gospel.