

Gaudete

This new Lectionary Year we've just started, Year A, is sometimes called Matthew's year because during it you'll hear a lot from his Gospel. Matthew begins with a long genealogy of Jesus, which blessedly is never assigned as a Sunday lesson. Matthew's stories about the birth of Jesus focus more on Joseph than Mary, so they aren't used at Christmas. Ironically, we'll hear Matthew's version of the birth next Sunday, even though it will only be the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

In today's Gospel passage Jesus is already grown up, surrounded by crowds. John the Baptist has already been thrown in prison by King Herod. Yet after all of his preaching about the one who is to come, John is starting to have doubts. Maybe that Jesus cousin of his *isn't* the one the prophets were talking about. So John sent his disciples to find out.

When they arrive Jesus doesn't try to convince them by words. Instead, he tells them to watch and listen to what's going on. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear. Did the prophets predict all of that, Jesus implies? Of course they did, and the disciples take their report back to John.

After they leave, Jesus turns to the crowd and underscores John's presence as a prophet. He was indeed the one preparing the way. Jesus then goes even further. He says that John is the greatest "among those born of women" yet in the kingdom of heaven the *least* person there is even greater than John.

When one considers how Jesus emphasizes the least; heals the blind, lame, lepers, and deaf; and preaches good news to the poor, it's abundantly clear that he is focused on the marginalized and those who are at the edges of society. No wonder the soft-robed people in power took offense at him.

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent, often called Gaudete or Rejoice Sunday. That's why I'm wearing these colorful rose vestments. Our closing hymn will be "Rejoice, rejoice believers." In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah we heard that the desert will rejoice and blossom, the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing. If you look closely, all of the rejoicing in Isaiah is associated once again with people and places on the margins of society.

There's a clear message here for us. Do we cast our lot with the marginalized and thereby experience the joy and healing of Jesus? Or do we put our trust in wealth and power? In this season when all eyes are how much consumers are spending, we can easily fall into the cultural trap of thinking that having more things brings happiness. Today the Bible tells us just the opposite. The ones who receive healing from Jesus and joy from God don't have much.

To my left, there's a mitten tree collecting warm gloves and scarves for children who don't have them. In today's bulletin you'll find a request for funds for the Hispanic Food Pantry run by a sister congregation down the street, a counterpart to the food pantry at The Center which we already support. There are many charitable causes, local, national, and international, that benefit people much more than an additional inflatable snowman on the front lawn.

Sometimes it's hard to walk in the way of Jesus, but not during this gift-giving season. I encourage you to make donations in honor of loved ones to organizations that benefit those on the margins. It's one of the best ways you can follow Jesus Christ and also celebrate Gaudete Sunday. Giving to others will make your heart rejoice.

[Advent 3: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11.]