

## Third Sunday of Advent

### Reading 1

[Is 61:1-2a, 10-11](#)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,  
to heal the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and release to the prisoners,  
to announce a year of favor from the LORD  
and a day of vindication by our God.

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.  
As the earth brings forth its plants,  
and a garden makes its growth spring up,  
so will the Lord GOD make justice and praise  
spring up before all the nations.

### Responsorial Psalm

[Lk 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54.](#)

#### **R. (Is 61:10b) My soul rejoices in my God.**

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked upon his lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed:

#### **R. My soul rejoices in my God.**

the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear him  
in every generation.

#### **R. My soul rejoices in my God.**

He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel  
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,

#### **R. My soul rejoices in my God.**

### Reading II

[1 Thes 5:16-24](#)

Brothers and sisters:

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.

In all circumstances give thanks,

for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not quench the Spirit.  
Do not despise prophetic utterances.  
Test everything; retain what is good.  
Refrain from every kind of evil.

May the God of peace make you perfectly holy  
and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body,  
be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
The one who calls you is faithful,  
and he will also accomplish it.

## **Gospel**

[Jn 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

A man named John was sent from God.  
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,  
so that all might believe through him.  
He was not the light,  
but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John.  
When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests  
and Levites to him  
to ask him, “Who are you?”  
He admitted and did not deny it,  
but admitted, “I am not the Christ.”  
So they asked him,  
“What are you then? Are you Elijah?”  
And he said, “I am not.”  
“Are you the Prophet?”  
He answered, “No.”  
So they said to him,  
“Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us?  
What do you have to say for yourself?”  
He said:  
“I am *the voice of one crying out in the desert,*  
*‘make straight the way of the Lord,’*”  
as Isaiah the prophet said.”  
Some Pharisees were also sent.  
They asked him,  
“Why then do you baptize  
if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?”  
John answered them,  
“I baptize with water;  
but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,  
the one who is coming after me,  
whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.”  
This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,  
where John was baptizing.

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## HOMILY

The prophet Isaiah says, “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news ...” And Mary sings “My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord.” This is about ‘call and response’: The Lord calls and we respond. We hear this too with John the Baptist while he’s in his mother’s womb. At the sound of Mary’s voice, Elizabeth says that her baby, John, leapt inside her. John responds to the Mother of God. Call and response.

Notice how the liturgy is structured as call and response. We begin with the priest’s greeting, “The Lord be with you,” and the people respond “And also with you.” Then we listen to the first reading from the Old Testament, and respond with the “responsorial psalm.” Today, when we sang the words of Mary in the psalm, we can hear Mary, in a way, respond to the good news of Isaiah. Later we hear the Gospel and homily, which is followed by the Creed and Prayer of the Faithful. Having heard the Word of God proclaimed, we stand to profess our faith; it’s a re-commitment of what we believe. Then we promise to commit ourselves to others as we petition God in their name.

Also, the whole Word of God is God’s call to us. And we respond by coming together to the table of Communion. After Communion we are sent: called to bring what we have heard here into our daily life. So, that’s what we are about here: God calls and we respond.

However, this may not be as easy as it sounds. I realized this on a recent flight to Las Vegas. Last month I went to Las Vegas to give a week-end workshop on preaching for the permanent deacons of the diocese. About fifty deacons and their wives attended. (By the way, the Church in Las Vegas is growing rapidly. They just built two new parish churches, and, in the suburbs, a brand new high school that looks like a small college campus.) Now, to get there, I flew Southwest Airlines, making a stop at Burbank. In this short flight the passengers heard the safety instructions twice. If you fly regularly you know what I’m talking about. On a smaller plane one of the flight crew stands in the aisle and explains how to fasten your seat belt and where you’ll find the rest rooms and exits. Then come the emergency instructions: if we lose “cabin pressure,” an oxygen mask will drop down; put it on and breathe normally. In case of a water landing (. . . a water landing – from Oakland to Las Vegas? The only chance of a water landing is if we end up in somebody’s backyard pool! Still they have to say this.) But if there should be a water landing you have a life vest and your seat cushion acts as a flotation device. “Thank you and enjoy the flight.”

So here was this young man reciting these instructions. I feel for him. Most of the passengers ignore the instructions. They have their noses buried in a book, a newspaper, or a laptop, or doze off. It’s not important to them. And the young man read the instructions as if he knew no one was listening, simply fulfilling his obligation; by law somebody has to say this. However a flight crew member will tell you that every once in awhile there is an emergency. We hope it doesn’t happen, but we need to be prepared. But really, no one wants to crash, we really don’t think we will crash, so just get going and get us there. For some of us – we’ve heard it all before – we could give the instructions! It really doesn’t matter.

The reason this stood out to me this time was that, like I said, I was on my way to a

conference on preaching. I was going down there to talk to them about the challenges of preaching . . . how difficult it is to preach. It occurred to me that sometimes the church is like this airplane. Sometimes a preacher talks like that steward: he's required to preach but doesn't think anyone really is listening, so he rambles on to fill the time. And sometimes the congregation acts as if they have heard it all before. ("Just get us through this and on to brunch.")

But today, as we listen to Isaiah, Mary and John the Baptist, we know that when God speaks he wants and waits for a response. God wants us to sit up, turn off the distractions, and listen. God is speaking now. Notice that we hear this call in Advent, the darkest time of the year. These days of December are the darkest – the shortest days of the year with the least amount of sunlight. It's in this darkness that God shines a light.

Today God speaks through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah sounds a compassionate, consoling message. It is different from his earlier one. The early Isaiah spoke to the Israelites when life was good, when their country was prosperous, they were materially minded and overly self-confident. Back then Isaiah warned them that God would punish them if they forgot Him. But now the Israelites are in exile. They had been invaded and forced to leave their homeland. They are dazed, discouraged and destitute. So Isaiah doesn't talk of punishment, but consolation. He wants to strengthen their faith in a situation that seems hopeless (Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 22:1). This was a dark time for Isaiah.

Today God speaks through Mary. This young girl, a descendant of those who were exiled, she's still a second class citizen in her own land, ruled by the Romans. And when Gabriel breaks into her room to announce that she will be the Mother of God, she recoils and (perhaps) protests: "How can this be? I'm not yet married!" She's reassured: "With God, all things are possible." Mary's hesitancy reminds us that when called by God, everyone hesitated. From Moses to Mary, Jeremiah and Jonah, Samuel and Simon Peter – all of them looked for a way out. But God waited, and they responded. God called them out of their darkness into His marvelous light.

The light: that's the purpose of John the Baptist, directing people to the light. Good lighting in a room doesn't call attention to itself but allows you to see what is in the room. So John is not the focus but he points to the One who is the light (Barbara Reid, *America*, 12/8/08).

These are dark days for us in this economic crisis. We feel the effect of home foreclosures, tightening credit, and rising unemployment. It has given some preachers the opportunity to claim that this is God's punishment on our society. I doubt that very much. But God is calling to us in these dark times, trying to lead us, console us, and challenge us. I must confess that this may be the first time I have really experienced Advent – this waiting in anticipation – uncertain but hopeful. It is a time to take seriously the safety instructions: what we need to know for our journey. As economists and financial wizards fail to shed light on this crisis, we find ourselves waiting with Isaiah and Israel, wondering how this will all end up. And like Mary, preparing to bring a child into the world, hopeful yet anxious, we wait to move from darkness into God's bright glory. But we should not rush into the light. There's an old proverb: "When it is dark enough you can see the stars" (Persian proverb, in *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson). These stars are God's promises, signs of where God has been with us in the past and

of how God has never forgotten us.

Finally, notice that we have not mentioned Jesus Christ once today. He is not in the readings. But He is waiting in the wings, waiting for our response.

Amen.

***Thomas Scirghi, S.J.***