

## ADVENT THREE, YEAR B, DECEMBER 13, 2020

You may or may not realize that when the President of the United States makes a visit to any venue the secret service has to check out every building along the route the president will travel and the place where he will appear. These persons are known as the "advance people" and they also arrive early the day of the event to make sure everything is in place. When I was in Seminary during Reagan's administration, we heard that Billy Graham was going to preach at our National Cathedral in DC on a Sunday afternoon. A group of us decided to go and we got there quite early. My friend Annwn from Mississippi sought out some ushers to get some bulletins and came back very bewildered and complaining that the ushers had no idea where the bulletins were for the service and were absolutely clueless of where to even find them. We asked who she had approached. She pointed to several men and we took one look at them with their head sets on and told her, "Annwn that's the secret service." Obviously President Reagan or Vice President Bush was coming for the service; in this instance it was Vice President and Mrs. Bush.

In today's Gospel we encounter such an "advance man." However, he's not a member of the Secret Service. He's not preparing for a visit from a head of state. He's not checking out parade routes to assure their safety. Rather, he is telling us to get ready for something extraordinary. His name is John the Baptist, who was introduced to us last week in Mark's Gospel, and we are told today that "he came as a witness to testify to the light."

That statement may not seem to mean as much 2,000 years later as it did back then. That's because we already know the ending to the story. We don't need an "advance person" to prepare the way for Jesus like they did. Or maybe we do need one or at least listen to John the Baptist? Perhaps there is something in his message that we are taking for granted. That is a problem with the familiar -- we fall into a sense of complacency. As a result, the coming of Christ can become simply a "festival of the familiar" rather than an "encounter with the Holy One."

Two words in the passage stand out to me: "witness" and "light." Last week we heard John call for repentance and change. Today we hear him quoting Isaiah and calling us to prepare for Christ by building a straight road in the desert.

What did Isaiah say is the purpose of all this construction? "So that the glory of the Lord may be revealed for all the world to see!" The powerful words of Isaiah looks straight into the face of a dark world and proclaims that, no matter what humankind may think, this world still belongs to God—and therein lies our hope.

John's message about the coming Christ is that God wants every person in the entire world to know the power and glory of God. In his oratorio, *Messiah*, George Frederic Handel majestically captures these words of Isaiah in music. "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

John the Baptist and Isaiah bring us a simple yet startling message of good news. It is this: God is faithful to God's word and promises. God keeps the covenant made with God's people. But even more than that, God is a God of salvation who brings comfort, gladness, relief, and restoration.

The prophet Isaiah even offers us the image of wedding apparel that symbolizes something new happening for the people of God. John the Baptist echoes this good news

of the prophet and points us to a new dimension: we need to stop living dressed in the garment of death and mourning and put on the clothing of a people who believe, truly believe, that God has given us life and given it abundantly.

Roman Catholic sister and activist, Joan Chittister offers us some perspective on this same theme. She says: "It is while waiting for the coming of the reign of God, Advent after Advent, that we come to realize that its coming depends on us." Getting ready for Christmas is not about decorated trees or even family gatherings. It is about a mission that God has placed upon every one of us: to open up a path to God for ourselves and others who are in need of God's love and grace. If we really "hear" that, it will have an effect on both our preparation for and celebration of Christmas. John is telling us that God expects us to do something as a result of what God did at Christmas.

Our relationship to God is not a "consumer faith" in which everything is neatly packaged for us and all we have to do is pick it off the shelf when we need it. It's not about "if I do this for God, I will be rewarded and I will be taken care for the rest of my life. Nor is faith a "let someone else do it" affair in which we allow a dedicated few to do the tasks which belong to all of us. John is saying that to constantly keep Christ in our sight requires the active involvement of every one of us year around. He is saying we are to build these roads everywhere -- into our jobs, our schools, our communities, our neighborhoods -- anywhere and everywhere we go!

The second word that stands out is "light." At this time of the year we are quite aware of the shortening of the daylight and the encroaching darkness. This year many of us have felt we have been walking in darkness long before actual darkness has come. The pandemic has made us depressed, lonely and as some call it having COVID brain. Darkness has a way of taking a subtle toll on our spirits. Because it happens little by little, even to the most dedicated people, we usually don't notice it. Then, one day it suddenly gets dark and we wonder what happened. Truth is when you take hope out of the equation of life then you take away life itself and darkness will envelope you. It is no wonder that during the winter season we rely on technology to light up the inside and outside of our homes in order to dispel the darkness. However, it cannot generate light for our hearts and souls.

If actions do speak louder than words (and they do), then at Christmas God has virtually shouted to the world that God cares enough to enter the place we live and bring light to the dark spots in our lives that we cannot seem to light on our own. Christmas light is about an end to isolation and despair that even our best efforts can't seem to fix. Christmas is about hope when the stage of life is the darkest. Christmas is about a future that God has provided for when death appears to be the final word in life.

Paul tells us if we really believe and internalize this message, then our attitude should be one of rejoicing. This is why today is known as "Gaudete" Sunday. "Dare to rejoice" Sunday! It is there in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. "Rejoice always!" he says to the persecuted believers in Thessalonica. What strange advice to give to people in the midst of hostility. What strange advice to give to us in the middle of the darkness of this pandemic. But, as one who had endured suffering, Paul knew so well that joy is not about being on cloud nine, but about the joy that rises quietly from within, from one's personal trust in God and from the sense that God is with us. That is true joy, for it happens even when circumstances are difficult. It is a joy that comes even in the midst of deep suffering.

I think this year, more than any other time, we need to hear this message again and again. Rejoice that hope is faith facing the future.

This morning we have heard from the "advance man." He reminds us that God has turned on the brightest light in the universe -- brighter than any sun or star or technology driven light. He also reminds us that we are the advance people of this generation. We are to tell everyone who will listen that the light has already come. So to paraphrase John's Advent message, "Prepare the way of the Lord," let's get going and "Turn on the lights." Amen.