

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John the Baptist was travelling around the Judean countryside baptizing. The fact that he was drawing crowds, attracted lots of attention of both the general population and the authorities. In addition, Jewish tradition promised the arrival of a Messiah, so the people of Israel and Judea were hoping for a Messiah to rescue them, to drive out the Romans.

It was with these high expectations in mind that they questioned John the Baptizer, as to if he was the promised Messiah. But John said, no, he was not, he was only preparing the way for another who was coming after him. In this exchange with the Jewish authorities, we have a picture of John's early ministry of preparing the way for the one who is to come, Jesus the Messiah.

John was baptizing people and calling them to repentance and forgiveness, to a new relationship with God. Jesus did so, too, calling his followers to a new life in the Spirit: to care for the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the outcast, to bring release to the captives; to proclaim the kingdom of God, and we hear this message repeated again and again in Jesus' words and actions.

As we have in the last two Sundays and again today, we are in the season of Advent, the season of waiting. We are waiting for the birth of the Holy Child, the return of the Son, the Light of the World, just as John was waiting in his time for the coming of the Messiah. Our waiting is an earthly waiting and a spiritual waiting.

However, for us, there is more to it than waiting, we are also called to action, to being about the work God has called us to, the work we have been hearing about this Advent season. Even in this time of waiting, of anticipation, the world is waiting for us to live out our Christian responsibilities. Just as John carried out his ministry while he waited for Jesus, we must remember that, we too, are to carry on with our Baptismal ministry. The promises made in the Baptismal Covenant at Holy Baptism are our guideposts for our Baptismal Ministry. In fact, a combination of waiting and active ministry is necessary for a rich and balanced life.

Most of us live pretty unbalanced lives in so many ways, we work too much; we eat poorly; we don't exercise; we allow too little time for rest, play, or prayer; and so on. We live in an unbalanced society that defines our self-worth by the amount of doing and busyness in our lives. And the irony is that this time of waiting comes at such a busy, stressful time for most of us, the holiday season that is even more stressful than ever, this Advent.

But perhaps, for us, this is the greatest lesson of Advent, and the greatest challenge. We live in the northern hemisphere, and this is the time of year that the natural world slows down. The days grow shorter, lakes and streams slow and freeze, the mountains retreat into their snowy vastness, animals and plants hibernate and wait for spring. We are invited to slow down as well. Our bodies want to slow down, to sleep more. And in the old days, this was the time to mend the fishing nets and farm tools, the time for sewing and telling stories around the fire, for going to bed early. Life slowed down. It was part of the natural cycle.

But with all our modern conveniences, we pay little attention to the rhythms of nature, and besides, it's holiday season, and

there's too much to do!

So one side of Advent is to learn how to slow down, how to enter into this more measured time of year, to enter into the waiting and the quiet contemplation. That's one of the reasons behind the old tradition of our parents and grandparents, of not decorating the church, or our homes, and not singing carols until closer to Christmas. It was a way of honoring that quieter, less hectic time, a way of taking a time out, to stop and rest, breathe, and prepare.

And yet, we know that even in the midst of what is to be a more unhurried, laid back time, the world still cries out in need. The hungry still need food, the naked still need clothing, the sick and imprisoned need our attention, the poor and the downtrodden need justice. That is the heart of our call, and the heart of this season. After all, we speak of Jesus as Emmanuel, as "God with us," wonderful counsellor, Prince of Peace. If we believe that, if these are more than just fancy words, we have to find a way to make them real, to embody them.

We may feel worn out by the needs of the world crying out from every corner of the globe: poverty, war, greed, and injustice. In addition, all over the world, including in our own country, children go to bed hungry. Violence and poverty walk the streets of our wealthiest cities, in many small communities, and in the quiet homes of our own neighbourhoods.

So how do we even begin to meet these overwhelming needs?

Since we are not God, we cannot fix everything. We can only do what we are called to do by the Holy Spirit. And to understand that, we need Advent, and other times of quiet contemplation, where we can go deep inside and hear the whisperings of the Spirit, as it calls us to our own individual and community work in the world. Advent serves as a reminder of

this need to take time out from the usual busyness of our lives. As we continue our journey through this Advent season, let us take advantage of this gift of time. Don't let all our time in the next week or so be totally caught up in the tiring, frantic craziness of preparing for the commercial side of Christmas.

Let us be intentional in finding, and setting aside, some time to be still. In that time, if we are willing to listen, we may receive a clearer vision of how we are called to bring freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, and good news to the poor in our communities and our world.

AMEN.