

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT – A December 16, 2007

In the year 587 BC the Jewish people were sent into exile in Babylon. They remained there, in what is also referred to as the Babylonian Captivity, for the next 50 years, until King Cyrus of Persia freed them in 538 BC. During this time they led a wretched existence because they had lost their land, their king and their temple.

They wallowed in despair. Everything they had lived for and worked for was gone. The most tragic thing about it was that it was their own fault. They had been warned, especially by the prophets, that if they didn't change their sinful ways, there would be serious consequences. To their deep regret, they ignored these warnings.

One of these great OT prophets was a man named Isaiah, whom we've talked about these last couple weeks. His message was one of hope. The Lord who had sent judgment and punishment upon his sinful people would be the same Lord who would restore the exiles to the Promised Land, once they had properly repented, of course.

Isaiah's description of this restoration in today's first reading is really quite poetic. First he talks about how different elements of nature will rejoice: the desert will bloom with abundant flowers and the Lord's glory will be evident everywhere. Then Isaiah makes the miracles more human: he says the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap, the mute will sing. It will be a time of incomparable joy and gladness.

Later on, in today's Gospel, Jesus uses these very same images to describe his own ministry. In the chapters that come before this section of Matthew's Gospel, we have seen Jesus curing lepers, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead and giving sight to the blind.

All of this is what prompts John the Baptist, who had been thrown into prison by King Herod, to ask Jesus, "Are you he who is to come?" John the Baptist's longing for Christ is what keeps him looking eagerly to each new day, hoping to finally see the Messiah who had been promised for so many centuries.

And that is why Jesus' reply is so deliberately elaborate as he quotes Isaiah, "The blind recover their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them." In other words, Jesus is saying his identity seems to be quite clear. With all these signs, there shouldn't be any doubt who Jesus is.

But just before these words, Jesus says to the disciples of John the Baptist, "Go back to John and report what you see and hear." This was a challenge for his disciples to see the light themselves and then to respond to it by believing even more strongly than they already believed.

There is an implication here for us that our faith in God is something that is constantly growing, always getting better, becoming stronger. The light gets brighter. Even our second reading, from the letter of James, uses this word "see" to refer to the Second Coming. We are steadily being drawn closer and closer to the final coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time, whether we like it or not, and whether that phrase *end of time* means the actual end of the world, or our own personal end.

Perhaps this is why we wear the lighter rose-colored vestments this Third Sunday of Advent. As we draw closer to the coming of Christ, the brighter vision of his presence in our life guides us. A youngster once observed to me some years ago that more old people go to church than young people because old people are closer to death and so they're more afraid.

I think it's just the other way around. Old people—and old here doesn't just mean chronological age, it can also mean more emotionally mature and more spiritually healthy—but these people have responded to the many challenges God has placed before them, and so they are much *less* afraid to face the God who has always led them through whatever life has thrown at them.

You noticed, of course, that we lit the third candle on our Advent wreath. As the light spreads and increases around the wreath, the circle is almost complete. And so, as the light of Christ glows more brightly in our lives, we are challenged to see Christ more clearly, as today's readings tell us, both in ourselves and in others, and we are drawn back to the God who made us as the circle of our lives moves on toward its completion.

We have one week and a couple days until we celebrate the coming of Christ on the feast of the Nativity. We have *who knows* how much time until the coming of Christ at the end of our days. But either way, the Advent season and the Advent of our lives gives us the opportunity to see the light of Christ more clearly, so that when he comes, the Savior we welcome will not be a stranger to us.