

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT / GAUDETE

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11; St. Matthew 11:2-11

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The HOLY SPIRIT, through the prophet Isaiah, tells us there will come a voice of one crying out in the wilderness. This “*voice*” will proclaim our warfare is ended, our sins forgiven, as well as the mercy of GOD, whose grace is more than double all our iniquities. Can you hear this voice? It speaks of the day when, like a shepherd lovingly tending his flock, GOD will “*gather His lambs into His arms and carry them in His bosom.*” He calls the people of GOD to climb to the highest places and loudly proclaim “*Behold your GOD!*”

St. John the Baptist is this “*voice.*” He is the prophet prophesied. He is the one of whom “*the prophets and the Law prophesied,*” the one who was to make straight highways in the desert wilderness of sin and death, to level the valleys and mountains, and make the rough places smooth that the glory of the LORD could be revealed to every eye on Earth or under the earth.

John the Baptist is GOD’s forerunner sent to prepare your heart to receive your SAVIOR. He comes to make ready the way of the LORD by giving “*light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death...*” and by guiding their feet “*into the way of peace.*” St. John the Baptist came pointing to JESUS as the answer to all the brokenness of this world, and the emptiness that haunts every human soul.

John the Baptist comes proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of GOD in JESUS CHRIST with the words, “*Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!*” The Kingdom of Heaven has now arrived in the flesh of JESUS CHRIST.

Therefore, we join with St. John lifting up our voices in strength without fear. The Kingdom is with us in CHRIST JESUS, so let all doubt be put to flight. JESUS is the “*Coming One,*” the MESSIAH, the CHRIST, and there is no other! GOD has come to us in the flesh of JESUS. He is “*GOD with us*” who has come to save us from our sins. In JESUS, it is GOD Himself who walks among us. This is our comfort and our peace!

These glad tidings also come with a warning: “*All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, But the Word of our GOD stands forever.*”

With these words we are called to repentance. Our time here is fleeting, fading quickly away. We are warned to make the best of it before the end comes; to repent and confess our sins

before it is too late and the time for forgiveness over. For the GOD who saved us, sacrificing His own flesh and blood, will return as our judge.

John was aware of this. Indeed, this was his message. The “*Coming One*” was coming to lay His axe “*to the root of the trees.*” He was coming with His “*winnowing fan in His hand*” to “*thoroughly clean out His threshing floor*” and “*gather His wheat into the barn*” and burning “*the chaff with unquenchable fire.*” The “*Coming One*” was coming to judge the unrepentant and all unbelievers, and time was running short.

John the Baptist knew this and believed this, and yet, he did not see this. The prophets of old told of something about to happen, something just beyond the horizon of our awareness. Their words were words of warning or words of comfort, and most often both. St. John was aware of what the prophets had to say about the coming MESSIAH, and it appears that these words of the prophet Isaiah may have had the greatest influence on his expectations of what the MESSIAH would be: “*Behold, your GOD will come with vengeance....*” but as I said, this is not what he saw.

He was perplexed. His own disciples brought to him stories of JESUS’ works, and what John heard was not the works he expected. Where was the winnowing fan separating the wheat from the chaff? Where was the fire? Where were the trees cut down by their roots? Where was the Judge? Where was the avenging GOD? To John, the threshing floor was still a mess, wheat and chaff hopelessly lay upon the floor in utter confusion and chaos. Was there to be another “*Coming One*”? John sent his disciples to JESUS to clear up the confusion.

John knew that GOD does things in His own time according to His own plan. The problem for John is that GOD’s plan, as revealed by GOD through His prophets, did not include the timeline. What was to come first, as it were, the chicken or the egg? What was to come first, GOD’s grace and mercy or GOD’s judgment? Only GOD knew.

Only GOD knew, so St. John the Baptist was, as I said, perplexed. But John was also wise. He knew exactly where the answer was to be found. So, he sent his disciples to the source, to the MESSIAH Himself.

How does our LORD answer Johns perplexity? He sends him back to the words of Holy Scripture; the answer you heard for yourself this very morning: “*Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.*”

JESUS’ answer directs John back to the promises of GOD in the words of the same prophet who called the MESSIAH an avenger—Isaiah. “*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert. The parched ground shall become a pool, And the thirsty land springs of water....*”

No mention of vengeance here; no words of judgment. Only grace—pure grace!

In sending St. John back to Isaiah, JESUS gives John the timeline—first comes GOD’s grace through His mercy and forgiveness. The calling of GOD’s elect must first be completed; the baptized in CHRIST must be washed in His Blood, and the all atoning sacrifice of GOD’s holy flesh upon the cross of Calvary must be accomplished. Then, and only then, will all things be complete and made ready for the judgment. Then this Gospel must be preached to the “*poor.*” Only then will it be “*finished.*” Only then, will the judgment come; it will come in GOD’s own time, at GOD’s own choosing. For now, it is the time of GOD’s grace.

Now *is* the time of GOD’s grace. Now *is* the time of our salvation. All things are complete and the Gospel has gone out into this dying world. Yet, only those who recognize their need of GOD’s grace will receive it. Only those who repent will reap the benefits of GOD’s mercy. Those who do repent will be blessed. John’s preparation, then, is to break the hearts of sinners and trouble the consciences of the hardhearted and the unrepentant, so they are able to hear and believe JESUS’ Gospel message of forgiveness and be blessed.

John prepares us for JESUS, the promised MESSIAH, the CHRIST, the “*Coming One*” whom John calls the “*the Lamb of GOD who takes away the sin of the world.*” He prepares us for the Lamb who comes seeking and saving the lost with GOD’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness. He prepares us for our SAVIOR who seeks out the lame, the deaf, the blind, and the spiritually dead; who brings the good news of salvation to the poor in SPIRIT, and offers redemption from death and the grave, through reconciliation to His FATHER for all mankind. John the Baptist prepares us for JESUS who comes to establish His Kingdom and fill it with sinners like you and me!

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✕ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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