

Third Sunday of Advent – December 17, 2017 – Good Shepherd Parish

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 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.

Psalm: Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54

R. (Isaiah 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.

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 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: John 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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INVITATION TO PRAY

Pause for a few moments of silence and enter more deeply into the presence of God.

Proclaim the Scriptures out loud.

As you listen to the scriptures be attentive to a word, a phrase, a question, an image, or a feeling that emerges. Reflect on this quietly or share it aloud.

INVITATION TO REFLECT

Darkness can terrify us. But the right kind of darkness can give us peace. A night of good sleep, for instance. Or a “lovely soft day,” as the Irish call those shady, rainy, drizzling days that are typical of Ireland and make it so green. I had an experience of a dark day when I was in Hawaii, no less, a place where light abounds. A brother Jesuit and I agreed to climb all the way up the side of Maui’s volcanic mountain—with a guide and with friends—and then climb down into the huge crater itself. Fine, but no one had mentioned the great dark cave at the other end of the crater floor. This was a “lava tube,” formed when a huge molten stream began to cool and harden its outside while the inside continued to flow, leaving a hollow. Of course this is why it was a “tube.” We were ushered into this cave/tube, and of course went trustingly. After a few curves and reverses, there was no morsel of natural light left in the cave! Only one small electric bulb (our salvation). We settled down on various rocks by its light. Then our “guide” turned it off. Yes. He had warned us of this ahead of time, very kindly and all, but the words “put out the light” did not sound comforting to my ears.*

Deep, undifferentiated darkness settled in around us and around everything. Eyes open, eyes closed, it was all the same. No light, no shadow, no least glow. Obviously he knew that we would feel trapped and afraid, lost in a strange place, our eyes put out. But the result was just the opposite. Against all reason, I felt wonderful: wonderful rest, wonderful peace. “I’ll turn the light back on now,” the guide whispered after several minutes, but we stopped him. “No, no, leave it off. Give us more time.” We sat, unseeing, united, consoled by the warmth and depth of absolute night. When the tiny bulb did finally return, our own eyesight surprised us. Sight was like a memory that had slipped away. Darkness made a resting place in which our souls re-charged, our eyes recovered their innocence. Maybe our daylight world had become too ordinary, too usual, too much just a tool to be used. Now the light seemed miraculous, a gift from God—even if it came through a trivial incandescent bulb! Why am I telling this? Well, in Sunday’s Gospel the people hungered for light like this. To John the Baptist they shouted, in effect, “are you the light?” Will you “bring glad tidings to the poor, healing to the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives and release [to] the prisoners” (First Reading)? The Baptist said. I am only pointing you toward the light. It will be here soon. Hold my arm till he comes. Have you and I found his arm to hold onto? What is our experience of darkness? Is it the opposite of quiet? For some of us, terror is its name! However unrelieved our night may be, know that there is always, forever, the promise of light. When we have been destitute for a long long time, even one speck of light will change everything. A tiny child might provide this on Christmas Eve!

*“Put out the light, and then, put out the light.” Those words are what Othello said just before he blew out the candle and then killed the sleeping Ophelia.

INVITATION TO GROUP SHARING

1. Sinful as we sometimes are, Pope Francis says our main purpose as Church is to “live and bear witness to Jesus, ... [to] bring glad tidings to the poor ... [to] set at liberty those who are oppressed.” If you can’t get away to help in Puerto Rico or it’s too dangerous to go to the Sudan, what can you do for the poor, the brokenhearted, the prisoners or captives in your own area?
2. How can you ensure that the Spirit has opportunities to work in you? How can anyone “rejoice always” when they are suffering? Do you know people who seem to do that? Do you find that all things work together for you if you love God? If you realize that, could that be “praying without ceasing”?
3. In the First Reading the Lord sends Isaiah with a message. In the Gospel, God sends John to testify to the light of Christ. Does God send you? If you decide to “testify to the light” by helping or looking for Christ in the poor all the time, could that be “praying without ceasing”?

INVITATION TO ACT

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. These should be your primary considerations.

CLOSING INVITATION TO PRAY

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for new insights, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another’s openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following:

O God, who see how your people faithfully await the feast of the Lord’s Nativity, enable us, we pray, to attain the joys of so great a salvation and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen