

3rd Sunday of Advent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 35:1–6A, 10
<i>Response</i>	Lord, come and save us.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 5:7-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. –Isa 61:1
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 11:2-11

The Third Sunday of Advent continues the Church’s journey through the Scriptures and continues her focus on the figure of John the Baptist. Now before I look at the Scriptures in detail I just want you to think about that for a second. Notice that every year the Church gives two whole Sundays to John the Baptist. That’s more airtime than anyone else gets, apart from the Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary, in terms of the lectionary. If you really look at the lectionary, the Gospel readings always focus on Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, and then on certain Marian feast days or Christmas we are going to focus on the Virgin Mary. But after those two, the next figure who gets the most airtime, so to speak, in the lectionary is St. John the Baptist. So this is a very important figure, it’s a very important moment in the history of the Church, and this Third Sunday of Advent really highlights just how critical John is. Jesus is actually going to call him the greatest among those born of women. So this is no small matter. Let’s look at St. John in this episode from Matthew 11:2–11. This is the Gospel for this week and we will put it in its context and then connect it with the Old Testament readings and the Psalm. It says this:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.” As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings’ houses. Why then did you

go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.’ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.¹

Okay! There is so much to talk about here. Let’s just try to back up and put it in context. The first thing we want to look at is the context of the question. As it implies here, John the Baptist has been put into prison by Herod. His prophetic ministry is over and he is now in prison awaiting a death sentence. He sends his disciples to Jesus—after hearing about the actions of Jesus (Jesus has begun performing various deeds)—asking the question “are you the one who is to come?” Literally in the Greek, *are you he who is to come?* Now that’s a very loaded question, a very mysterious question. On the one hand, most of us when we hear it, we think it simply means, “Are you the Messiah?” And that’s true, that’s part of the question.

But you’ll notice that he doesn’t say, “Are you the Messiah?” he says, “Are you he who is to come?” (Matt 11:3). And as we will see in a second, that is an allusion to Old Testament prophecies of the coming one, the coming of God—as we will see in a minute when we look at Isaiah 35. Notice how Jesus responds here. He is always kind of evasive in his answers. He doesn’t say “you’ve got it, you’re right, I am the Messiah” or something like that. He says go and tell John what you see. And he gives a list of criteria, a list of actions, that should tell John and his disciples who he really is. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. So that’s his list of accomplishments so to speak, and evidently Jesus thinks that’s enough to give the answer to the question without saying anything explicit. And he adds one little caveat too: a beatitude, “blessed is he doesn’t take any offense at me” (Matt 11:6).

Now in order to see what those things mean, we have to go back to the Old Testament reading—and I am going to do that in a just second—because, as we’ll see, the very passage that Jesus is alluding to is the first reading for this week, it’s the oracle of Isaiah 35. But before we do that, one quick point about John himself. The last section of this Gospel is Jesus, in a sense, asking the questions about the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994).

identity of John. So the passage begins with John asking about the identity of Jesus and now it reverses with Jesus asking about the identity of John. And he basically goes through a list of things and he says, “did you go into the wilderness to see a reed shaken by the wind?” (see Matt 11:7). In other words, someone who could be influenced very easily. Obviously John wasn’t that way, he fought hard, he resisted King Herod and his influence. He also says “did you go out to see one who lived in luxury?” (see Matt 11:8). Well no, John is a prophet, he is eating locusts and wild honey. “Did you go out to see a prophet?” (Matt 11:9). And that’s when Jesus says, “if that’s the case, let me tell you, John is more than just a prophet. He is the prophesied messenger of the Old Testament.”

Here Jesus alludes to a very important prophecy from the book of Malachi. I mentioned Malachi last week as prophesying that one day Elijah would come before the great and terrible day of the Lord, before the coming of the Lord (see Mal 4:5). And at the end of Malachi it also says that God is going to send his messenger to prepare his way (see Mal 3:1). So here Jesus identifies John as the messenger who would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord himself (see Matt 11:10). Now that’s very interesting because a lot of times Christians assume that he’s just talking about the coming of the Messiah. But if you go look at the book of Malachi, it doesn’t say anything about the coming Messiah, it says something about the coming of the Lord, about the coming of Yahweh, about the God of Israel coming on this great day of judgment. So what Jesus is saying here is that he’s more than a prophet because he’s the one who heralds the coming of the Lord himself.

And that’s why Jesus says, “among those born of women, no one is greater than John the Baptist” (Matt 11:11). Now sometimes Catholics get tripped up by that because they’ll say, “well hold on a second, isn’t Mary the greatest human who ever lived? How do you reconcile that with what Jesus says here?” Well you have to look at it in context because obviously he doesn’t mean that John the Baptist is greater than Mary because the context is old covenant prophecies and the old covenant people. That is why he says “no one is greater than John the Baptist, yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John” (see Matt 11:11). So he is contrasting the old covenant era—of which John is the greatest, the apex, the greatest man ever—and then the era of the new covenant, the new Kingdom, of which John is less than even the least in the kingdom, because it’s going to be a heavenly kingdom. So for a Catholic, just as an aside, you might think about that. Mary is not least in the kingdom of heaven, she’s actually the Queen Mother of the king of heaven. So John is not being put above Mary, but he is being singled out, in context, as the greatest man who ever lived in the Old Testament period, as the

greatest of all the prophets because he gets to herald the coming of the Lord himself.

Now in order to put Jesus's first response in context, we have to go back to the first reading. The first reading for the Third Sunday of Advent is nothing less than the very passage that Jesus is alluding to. So when John says "are you the one who is to come" (Matt 11:3), and Jesus says, "the blind see, the lame walk" and so on (Matt 11:5), he is essentially saying "go read Isaiah 35 and then you tell me." So let's do it, let's go read Isaiah 35 and listen to the prophecy that Jesus is alluding to. Isaiah 35:1–6 reads as follows:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

And then the lectionary skips down to verse 10:

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Wow, so what's that all about? Here Isaiah is prophesying about the future age of salvation and he is saying something very remarkable. He's describing a kind of new Exodus and he is describing a kind of revitalization of creation too, where he is saying that the very creation itself, the wilderness, the desert, the trees, the flowers, the mountains, they are all going to rejoice. Why? Because God is coming, because the Lord is coming. And when God comes the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf are unstopped, the lame man shall leap and the mute shall speak. Now it's hard overestimate the significance of that passage because when John asks Jesus, "are you the one who is to come," he could have said "well, look at this prophecy of the coming of the Messiah." But in this case he front-loads, he emphasizes, go back to Isaiah 35, the prophecy of the coming of

God himself, and these are the signs of God's coming. These miracles of the blind seeing, the lame walking and the deaf hearing.

If you have any doubt about that you might notice something. You might notice that Jesus adds something. He says that the lepers are going to be cleansed and that the dead will be raised. Now that's not in Isaiah 35 so why does Jesus say it? Well if you go back to the Old Testament you'll recall that in the book of Kings, 2 Kings 5, there is a story of the prophet Elisha being asked to heal Naaman, who was a leper. And when the leper comes and sends a messenger to ask Elisha to heal him, Elisha says, "am I God that I could heal a man with leprosy?" (2 Kings 5:7). So the assumption was that there are some miracles that only God himself could do. So when Jesus says the lepers are healed, that's another suggestion that he's responding to John's statement by pointing to not just to his identity as the Messiah, but his identity as the divine Messiah, as the God-man.

The same thing is true when he says "that the dead are raised up." There he is alluding to Isaiah 26. I am not going to read the passage so you can go back and look at it. In Isaiah 26 is one of the two occasions in the Old Testament with any reference to the resurrection of the dead. And when Isaiah says that the dead will be raised, if you read the context, guess when the dead are raised? When Yahweh comes, when God comes, the dead are going to be raised. So here Jesus says that as another criteria.

And then last, but certainly not least, there is one allusion to a prophecy of the Messiah. It is when Jesus says the poor will have good news preached to them. That is a prophecy that alludes to Isaiah 61. I won't read that to you, but it's a very famous text that says "the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the captives and to the poor" (see Is 61:1). So in a sense then, Jesus is taking these two sets of prophecies, the prophecies of the coming of God and the prophecy of the coming Messiah, and fusing them into one.

So John's question has a double answer. Are you the one who is to come, meaning are you the Messiah? Well look at what I've done, I preach good news to the poor. But are you more than the Messiah, are you the one who is to come, meaning the Lord who is to come? Well look at what I've done, the lame walk, the blind see, the mute speak, lepers are cleansed, and the dead are raised, you figure it out. That is what Jesus is saying, he is throwing the question back on them, and he is also reminding them, "blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (see Matt 11:6). Now why would he have to add that caveat? Why should anyone be offended by

the coming of the Messiah? The Messiah is just the anointed king of Israel. But if Jesus is saying he's not only the Messiah, he's also the divine son of God, he is God come in person, then there are going to be a lot of people who take offense at that. In fact, that is what he is going to be executed for, under the charge of blasphemy. So this is a powerful, powerful moment. In a sense, on the third Sunday, what we are getting is one of the first revelations of the divinity of Jesus in his answer to John the Baptist.

Now if you have any doubts about what I'm suggesting—I always like to say that, but it's fun because you see how the readings link all this up together—you can look at the theme for the Responsorial Psalm. Guess what the Responsorial Psalm is all about? It's Psalm 146 and the refrain for the psalm is “Lord, come and save us.” So the whole Psalm is about the coming of the Lord. It's about the coming of, not just God in a general way, but when you see the words LORD in Hebrew, L-O-R-D in all caps, that's a reference to Yahweh, the personal God, the God of Israel who is going to come in person to save his people. So if you look at that Psalm it begins by saying:

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!

and in verse 7 it's referring to the Lord, it says:

who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the sojourners,
he upholds the widow and the fatherless;
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
The LORD will reign for ever...

So notice, the things that Jesus says that he's doing, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, healing the sick, are the things that the Old Testament says Yahweh does, the LORD does. So this is another one of those examples where Jesus reveals his divinity, not in an explicit way by saying, “hey everybody, I'm God,” but by alluding to Old Testament prophecies and Old Testament Psalms that he's fulfilling in his own person, in his words and in his deeds.

And then finally, if we look at the second reading for this week in the Letter of James, after hearing all of this about the coming of the Lord, about the coming Messiah, about the coming of God, the Church exhorts us to be ready for the final coming of Christ, for the second advent of Christ, with a reading from the Epistle of James. So if you look at the Letter of James it says:

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors. As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Notice what James is saying here. Christians are called to have patience. He uses two analogies to explain this. We need to be patient like a farmer is patient with the fruit. Having just planted some fruit trees in my yard I know what this is about. I panted these fruit trees thinking that in one year I will have some fruit. No, no, no, it is going to take several years before I even get a single fruit that I can eat from them. So we want to be patient like a farmer waiting for his crops to come in. We also want to be patient like the Prophets, who didn't just have to wait one or two years, but who had to wait centuries before their prophecies are fulfilled. So that's the mindset that we should have during the Advent season. That is the posture of heart we need to have. It is one of expectancy, but also one of patience, for God will come because, as we know, he already has come in the incarnation and the coming of Jesus Christ. And just as he fulfilled the prophecies of his first coming at the time of John the Baptist, so too he will fulfill his prophecies of the second coming at the final judgment at the end of time

Again, I would like to close with a reflection from the tradition of the Church. This is from a 16th century Jesuit priest and commentator of the Bible, Cornelius à Lapide. He wrote a commentary on the Gospels and he has a very profound insight into the greatness of John the Baptist, and that's really who the Church is calling us to reflect on during this week. Cornelius wrote this:

Christ here calls John the greatest of all men. This must be understood of the worthies of the Old Testament, that is to say of all the time prior to Christ. John was sent by God to be Christ's precursor and the friend of the

bridegroom, so that he might show him to the whole world and testify that he is the Messiah and the only son of God. This office and dignity of St. John the Baptist far surpasses all the offices and the dignities of all the other prophets.²

He's the one who gets to herald, not just this or that act of deliverance, but the coming of God himself. That's why in the liturgy one of the most powerful moments in the Mass is during the communion rite, when after the consecration the priest takes the host and lifts it up and elevates the Blessed Sacrament and says "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb." At that moment in the Mass it is important to remember that the priest is taking the words of St. John the Baptist on his lips, because that is an allusion to the Gospel of John 1:29, where John the Baptist said of Christ, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Although throughout the Mass at every other point the priest is primarily speaking *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, at this key moment in the communion rite, the priest takes on another persona. It's the person of John the Baptist, and he utters the prophetic words of John the Baptist, "behold the Lamb of God," and at that moment turns all of our focus away from himself and to the Blessed Sacrament, to the Eucharist, so that we can prepare for the one who has come in the Eucharist itself, his body, his blood, his soul, and his divinity. In that sense, the prophetic role of John the Baptist, heralding Christ at his first advent, continues at every single Mass as he prepares us to meet the one who has come in the Eucharist.

² Cornelius à Lapide, *The Great Commentary of Cornelius À Lapide: S. Matthew's Gospel—Chaps. 10 to 21* (trans. Thomas W. Mossman; vol. 2, Fourth Edition.; Edinburgh: John Grant, 1908), 56.