

3rd Sunday in Advent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 61:1-1A, 10-11
<i>Response</i>	My soul rejoices in my God.
<i>Psalm</i>	Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thes 5:16-24
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 1:6-8, 19-28

The readings for the Third Sunday of Advent in Year B are a little surprising and they might take a little bit of explanation, because up to this point we have been working through the Gospel of Mark, that's what Year B is dedicated to, yet already on the third Sunday of this year we now switch over out of Mark into the Gospel of St. John. So what's going on here? This is something that is really important to stress. If you recall, Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, and so one of the things that had to be decided was that when Mark was allotted a year, 52 Sundays of readings, the Church made some decisions to supplement some of the aspects that are missing from Mark's gospel with passages from other Gospels, and in particular with the Gospel of John.

So you'll notice that what we have on the third Sunday of Advent is from the opening chapter of John's Gospel, and then you will see later on in the year when we get into ordinary time, there will actually be four or more Sundays that are taken from the Gospel of John 6, the Bread of Life discourse. So this is just part of Year B, Year B has a mix of Gospel readings. It is not exclusively the Gospel of Mark, and you can actually see why in this case because Advent is slowly moving us toward the preparation for the birth and the coming of Christ, and yet as I mentioned in the video on the Second Sunday of Advent, Mark doesn't have an infancy narrative. He doesn't tell us about the birth of Christ, so by definition the Church is going to have to supplement the readings for Advent and Christmas in Years B with passages from other Gospels. It just stands to reason.

So in this case it is interesting, we get a section from the Gospel of John that continues our Advent focus on the figure of St. John the Baptist. This is an interesting point to think about, that in terms of airtime, so to speak, after Jesus himself and the Blessed Virgin Mary, John the Baptist gets the most focus in terms of Sunday readings, Sunday Gospels, that are devoted to a particular person. There aren't multiple Sundays that are devoted, for example, to St. Peter or even to St. Joseph, but John the Baptist every year we get at least two Sundays in Advent that are focused on his life and on his mission. This Sunday it is from the Gospel of John. So let's read this passage together and then we will try to unpack it. John 1:6 says this:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

Then the lectionary skips a number of verses in John's Gospel and goes down to verse 19, which says this:

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No." They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.¹

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.

Alright, let's pause there. You should notice some similarities from last week's reading, the second Sunday of Advent in Year B. We are going to focus on the mission and the ministry of John the Baptist — although here we are getting the Gospel of John's account of the Baptist's mission. There are a few elements of it that are unique to John that we want to highlight. First and foremost, just the mission and identity of John the Baptist. Notice how St. John the Evangelist begins here, he begins by saying that this man who was named John was sent from God in order to bear witness to the light. So this is going to be a constant theme in John's Gospel; Jesus is not just the Messiah, he is not just the savior, he is not just the Lord or the king of Israel, he is the light of the world. So John the Baptist's mission is to be somebody who bears witness to the light. The Greek word for bear witness is *martureó*, we get the word martyr from that. So John is going to be in a real sense the first Christian martyr, in so far as he's going to die for bearing witness to Christ, the Messiah.

Another element here, notice that John tells us that the Baptist, John the Baptist, was not the light but came to bear witness to the light. Now why does he have to say that? Why does he have to say that John the Baptist was not the light? Well the reason is because John was an extremely popular Jewish figure. He was an extremely popular Jewish prophet. If you read, for example, the writings of Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, Josephus mentions John the Baptist and he mentions Jesus, but he gives a lot more attention to John the Baptist, creating the impression, and some scholars have suggested this, that in some ways John was even more popular and widely known than Jesus was. He was certainly a less controversial figure in the sense that he was widely accepted by his Jewish contemporaries as someone who was sent from God, who had a message from God. So John was extremely popular, so St. John the evangelist here is having to make clear to us that John himself is not the Messiah, but rather just his precursor, just his forerunner, because some Jews actually were wondering if John was in fact the Messiah.

This leads us into the next part of the Gospel, the question of John's identity. So what happens here is some Jews have been sent from Jerusalem, priests and Levites, in other words, leaders of the community, to ask him exactly who he is. And notice that John denies three potential identities. First, they ask him who are you and he says I'm not the Christ. Now when you see the word Christ there it's

really important to stress that the Greek word is *christos*. It just means anointed one. It is a title, not a name. So although we tend to use the word Christ as if it were Jesus' last name, it's not how it would've been utilized in the first century. So what the Baptist is literally saying here is I am not the anointed one. So strike one, he's not the king of Israel that everyone's been waiting for, which some people probably thought. Second, he also says that he is not Elijah. What's that about? Well if you look back at the book of Malachi 3-4, there's this prophecy that says that God is going to send Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord. So the Jews, based on that prophecy from Malachi, had developed the expectation that before the Messiah would come at the time of salvation, Elijah would have to come first. So when John the Baptist appears on the scene and he is clearly a prophet speaking for God, and he even dresses and acts like Elijah — he lives out in the wilderness and wears a garment made out of camel's hair like Elijah had dressed — some people say he must be Elijah. So they ask him, “are you Elijah?” And he says, “No, I'm not.” We will come back to that in a minute because it is a controversial part.

The third dimension here — you might miss it but it is really important — they ask him if he is the prophet. Now notice this. They don't just say “are you *a* prophet?” Everyone recognized that. What they say is “are you *the* prophet?” They use the definite article, *ho prophētēs* in Greek, and so the prophet in a first century Jewish context wasn't just anybody, it was a reference to Deuteronomy 18 and the prophecy of the prophet like Moses. Before the Israelites went into the promised land, Moses in the book of Deuteronomy says to them, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.” So the expectation developed that one day there would be this prophet like Moses who would come, and sometimes he was even associated with the Messiah himself. The Messiah was seen as the new Moses — I get into this in my book *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, where we look at Jesus as the new Moses.

So effectively what the Levites and Priests are asking John the Baptist here is are you the new Moses? Are you the Prophet like Moses? Then again, strike three, “no, I'm not the new Moses.” So who are you John? Well here John identifies himself. He basically says “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” In other words, I am the one who was spoken of by

Isaiah in Isaiah 40. Now we looked at this prophecy in detail last week for the Second Sunday of Advent, and we looked at how Isaiah had prophesied a new Exodus and this messenger who would come and would act as a herald to proclaim that God himself was coming in order to save his people, to proclaim the coming of the new Exodus. So this a very important text because in the Gospel of Mark, Mark lets you know that John the Baptist was the one that Isaiah had spoken of. But in John's Gospel, John the Baptist himself identifies himself as the figure from Isaiah chapter 40, the forerunner of God, the Herald of God, the prophet of the new Exodus. So that's how John the Baptist identifies himself in this passage.

Now when the Pharisees hear this response, their immediate question then to him is “wait a second then, why are you baptizing? If you're not the new Moses, if you are not Elijah, if you're not the Messiah, then you shouldn't be baptizing.” Now pause here. What does that mean? Well this is something we frequently forget. If you're a contemporary Christian, you might not realize that baptism was a part of Judaism at the time of Jesus, insofar as they practice ritual bathing. This was particularly prominent in Jerusalem around the Temple. Before you were able to enter into the Temple, you had to be ritually pure, you had to be ritually clean; which would mean you would not only have to prepare yourself through prayer and fasting perhaps, but that you would also have to wash yourself in ritually pure water, as the book of Numbers described in Numbers 19. So they would have these ritual baths called *mikva'ot*, the singular is *mikvah*, around Jerusalem and Jews would go down into the *mikvah*. They would wash, they would be immersed, and the Greek word for immersion in water is *baptizo*, so they would in a sense be baptized in order to go and encounter God in the Temple, in worship, in offering sacrifice.

Now John the Baptist then brings people out into the desert and he's baptizing them, he is washing them, not just for ritual purity, but for the forgiveness of their sins; and the priests and Levites are basically saying “hold on a second. If you're not the new Moses, if you are not the new Elijah, if you're not the Messiah, by what authority do you do this?” Because usually ritual preparations like this would be something that would happen in the Temple. You would have to be a priest. You would have to have some kind of authority. So John answers them by pointing away from himself and to Christ and he says, "I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the

thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." So he points them to the fact that the one who is really going to cleanse is going to be the Messiah himself. The one who is coming after him is far greater than John himself. You see the image there, once again just like in Mark's Gospel, of not being worthy to untie his sandals. What does that mean? Well untying someones sandals was the task of a slave. So if a master would come home from a long journey, what would the slave do? The slave would untie his sandals and wash his feet. That was one of the tasks of a slave. That's why when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples later on in John's Gospel, the disciples, in particular Peter, freak out. They are astonished and they recoil at the thought of Jesus washing their feet because he's basically saying I am your slave. What John the Baptist here is saying is the one who is coming after me, I don't even have enough authority, in a sense, to be his slave, to untie his shoes. That's how much greater he is than I. So clearly here John is testifying that he's not the one. He is not the one everybody's been waiting for. He is not the one who is to come. He is not Moses. He is not Elijah. He is not the Messiah. He's just a forerunner. He is just a predecessor.

So with that in mind, let's turn back to the Old Testament reading. The Old Testament reading for today, not coincidentally, is nothing less than a prophecy of the Messiah. So it's one of the most famous prophecies of the Messiah, It is from the book of Isaiah 61. One of the things you will notice about Advent is that if you like the book of Isaiah, this is your time of year. Because not only in the Sunday readings, but especially if you go to daily mass during the Advent season, you're going to get prophecy after prophecy after prophecy from the book of Isaiah. Some ancient Christians even referred to Isaiah as the fifth gospel, that the book of Isaiah was so accurate in its predictions of the Messiah and so profound in its descriptions of the Messiah, that you could kind of describe it as the fifth gospel — although it would actually be the first gospel because it would be written hundred of years before the four Gospels, but I digress. So let's look at the reading for today, it is from Isaiah 61 and says this:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

Then it skips a section there all the way down to verse 10, where it picks up and says:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my soul shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring forth before all the nations.

So what's the meaning of that prophecy? Why is this the first reading for the third Sunday of Advent? Well a couple of things are obvious. First, the anointing of the Messiah with the spirit of God. So when you see that expression in the first line, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me," the Hebrew word there for anointed is actually *mashach*, from which we get the noun *mashiach*, that just means anointed one. That exact word gets translated into Greek as *christos* or Christ. So there's a parallelism there between the *mashach* of Isaiah 61, the Messiah, the one was anointed, and the *christos* that John the Baptist mentions in the Gospel. So first point, it's all about the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah.

Second point, notice the language of good tidings or good news. As we saw earlier on in Advent, last week with second Sunday of Mark, the good news, the gospel, is rooted in Isaiah's prophecy of the coming of God, that one day God himself is going to come. And if that is not good news, I don't know what is. Because again, look at the world, not just at the time of Isaiah but at the time of John the Baptist in the first century A.D. Rome is in charge, Herod has committed all kinds of

atrocities and murders. There is violence, bloodshed, poverty, suffering and they are longing for God to fulfill his promises, to come and save his people. You could even imagine them crying “where are you God. All I hear is bad news, could you give me some good news.” Well that is what Isaiah is doing here, the spirit of the Lord is upon the Messiah. He's going bring good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, to bind up the brokenhearted. There was a lot of broken hearted people then, and there is a lot of broken hearted people now. That's what we are doing during Advent, we are looking at the good news, we are preparing ourselves for the good news of the coming of God.

And then the final aspect here that is really important is that verse, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall exult in my God.” So what's our response to God's coming? What's our response to the coming of the Messiah? Well it should be joy. We should exult, we should rejoice at the coming of the Messiah. So this reading is particularly appropriate for the Third Sunday of Advent, because the Third Sunday of Advent, as you probably noticed, is traditionally referred to as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin for rejoice. This is just taken straight from Philippians 2, which is used as the antiphon for this day. So this Third Sunday of Advent is getting closer and closer to Christmas and so we are supposed to focus on that experience of joy at the fact that the Messiah is finally going to come. You'll notice too on the Third Sunday, that priests will often shift the colors from wearing the purple or violet of the other days and weeks of Advent, to the color rose. Don't say it is pink, most priests will get offended if you say they are wearing pink. It is rose, that is the actual name of the color. I wore red today. I usually try to to match liturgical colors if I can, but I don't own a pink shirt and I don't own a rose shirt, and I wasn't going to buy one just for the video. But I am still going to rejoice because today is rejoice Sunday, and you can see that that theme is being highlighted in the Old Testament reading for today.

And not only in the Old Testament reading, but in the Responsorial Psalm. So if you look at today, there is another surprising aspect of the readings. Not only is the Gospel for the Third Sunday taken from John and not Mark, but the Responsorial Psalm is not taken from the Psalms, it is taken from the Gospel of Luke, and in particular from the Magnificat of Mary, her famous song of rejoicing that she sings after Elizabeth greets her during the mystery of the visitation to Elizabeth. So if you look over and turn over to Luke 1, the Responsorial Psalm for today is Luke

1:46 and following. It says this, after encountering Elizabeth and John the Baptist leaps in the womb of Elizabeth, we read these words:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name...

So notice here, why does the Church make the Magnificat...which by the way, that Latin word magnificat simply comes from the Latin translation of these verses in the Latin Vulgate. So when Mary says my soul magnifies the Lord, the Latin is magnificat. So when I call it the Magnificat, that's why I'm saying that. So in the Magnificat, Mary rejoices that she is being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, to be the mother of Christ, and so as we move into the second part of Advent, and are shifting into the third week with more anticipation toward the actual birth of Jesus himself, the Church gives us Mary's words from the Magnificat to kind of continue to foster that experience of joy on the third Sunday of Advent. Which by the way, one of the reasons that's the case is because Advent was traditionally a penitential season. You might have noticed that the Church's liturgical colors during Advent and Lent are Violet. The altar is draped in violet, the priests wear violet, why? Because purple is the color of penance. Everyone I think is pretty aware that Lent is a penitential season, but Advent historically developed as a season of penance as well, in which people would pray and fast in order to anticipate not just the birth of Christ, but to prepare themselves through prayer and fasting for the coming of Jesus, his second coming at the end of time. And in the middle of that season, on the Third Sunday, you could have a relaxation of those Advent penances and have a spirit of joy that you're halfway through the season and ready to get to Christmas. Just like in the Fourth Sunday of Lent you have the color rose as well as you make it halfway through the six weeks of Lent, you're entering into the second half of the season, there is a relaxation of penances traditionally that has been accompanied with that Fourth Sunday of Lent. So they are kind of parallel seasons, although obviously Advent is a less stringently penitential season, and it is more of a season of preparing for the joy of Christmas, but all this is swirling around the surface for the readings for this particular

Sunday. They're all chosen very carefully to highlight this experience of joy, the joy of the Blessed Mother becoming the mother of Christ. Who which, by the way, notice she says here “all generations will call her blessed” and not some generations will call her blessed. There really is an expectation that all Christians, not just Catholics, but all Christians throughout time will honor her as the joyful mother of the Messiah.

Finally, the second reading for this Sunday is, like the first two Sundays of Advent, thematically linked with the Old and New Testament readings. So I just want to briefly highlight it. It's from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24:

Rejoice always,
pray constantly,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

And then if you skip down to verse 23, it says:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly;
and may your spirit and soul and body
be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So why does the Church choose this reading? Well notice two themes: rejoice, so figures with Gaudete Sunday, but then also be ready for the *parousia* in Greek or the *adventus* in Latin, be ready for the advent of Christ. So the Church is always keeping before us not just the first coming, but the second coming of Christ at the end of time. So it is like a dual theme that runs throughout the readings for the Advent season.

In closing then I'd like to make a brief word here about something you might've noticed and might be having a question about. It goes back to the Gospel for this Sunday. You'll notice that in the Gospel of John 1, John the Baptist says that he is not Elijah. Now this might be a little problematic for you if you're familiar with the Gospel of Matthew, because in the Gospel of Matthew 11, Jesus actually says that John the Baptist is Elijah who is to come. The disciples, who were Jews, were familiar with the tradition that Elijah would come before the great and terrible day

of the Lord, that Elijah would come first, so they ask Jesus about that. Once he began predicting the death of the Son of Man, they said well don't the scribes say that Elijah must come first. And Jesus says to them them, if you're willing to accept it, John the Baptist came and he is, in a sense, as he puts it, he is Elijah who is to come. So what do we have here? Do we have a contradiction? Is Jesus contradicting what John the Baptist said? What's going on there? This is one of those occasions where skeptical scholars will sometimes say this is a contradiction, it shows that the Gospels have errors in them. But if you look at the living tradition of the Church, you can see that although it might appear to be a contradiction, when we put it in context it actually makes sense. I am going to lean here on the words of one of our popes, Pope St. Gregory the Great, who many years ago said this, many centuries ago. In his gospel homilies Pope Gregory writes:

[I]n another place his disciples asked our Lord about the coming of Elijah, he answered, "...John is Elijah" (Matt 11:14)." John, when he was asked, said, "I am not."... If we carefully examine truth himself, what sounded contradictory is found to be not contradictory. The angel said to Zechariah, of the promised birth of John, "that he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). This is said because just as Elijah is the forerunner of the Lord's second coming, so was John the forerunner of his first; as Elijah will come as the forerunner of the Lord, so was John the forerunner of the Redeemer. John, then, was Elijah in spirit; he was not Elijah in person.²

In other words, if you go back to the Old Testament you will remember, Elijah doesn't die, he ascends into heaven on the chariot of fire in the book of Kings. So many Jews thought that when the Messiah would come, Elijah would himself in person come down from heaven in order to be the predecessor of the Messiah, and some Jews in fact thought that's who John the Baptist was, that he was Elijah come back down from heaven in person. So when they ask him are you Elijah in person, John is saying no, I'm not Elijah, I haven't come back down from heaven. What he is though is the forerunner of the Messiah. He is the one who goes before the Lord as the angel Gabriel said in the spirit and power of Elijah. So John the Baptist is an Elijah type figure, but he is not Elijah reincarnated, he is not Elijah returned from

² St. Gregory the Great, Forty Gospel Homilies 4; trans. in J. Elowsky, 2006, p. 61

heaven, and the ancient Church Fathers, like St. Gregory here, believed that the actual Elijah, Elijah in person, would precede Jesus at his second coming. You can actually see this in the book of Revelation 11. Although that is a debated text, these two figures that appear seem to be Elijah and Moses returning in some way, shape or form. In any case, that is a debated point. What is not debated here though is that John the Baptist is not Elijah reincarnate, he is a different person than Elijah, but he is the forerunner of the Messiah, and so both things are true. Yes, like Jesus says, he is the forerunner of the Messiah, he is the new Elijah who is to come, but no, he's not Elijah come down from heaven. So we see there that both those truths come together to point us to the fact, once again, that John is the man sent from God who is come into the world to bear witness to light of the world who has come in Jesus Christ.