

Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 15, 2019

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As Jesus asked the crowd to think about why they went into the desert to see John, what were they expecting, it is good for each of us to ask ourselves, what do I hope for? Advent is this holy time of expectation but if we are expecting the wrong thing or if we don't know what we are supposed to be expecting, other than a present under the tree, we may miss the whole thing and the whole point.

What was John expecting? Jesus sends John's disciples back to him telling them to tell John what they see: that through Jesus the deaf are hearing and the blind seeing, the lame walk and lepers are cleansed, the poor have good news proclaimed to them - amazing things are happening - things that Isaiah and the prophets said would happen at the coming of the Messiah. But there is a disconnect here for John because he is in prison - the Messiah was supposed to bring the reign of God and all things were to be put in right relationship. The Messiah was to overthrow the powers of oppression. If Jesus is the one to come, John shouldn't be in prison, so he's thinking ... maybe Jesus isn't the one. He needed someone to tell him what Jesus was doing - and he needed different expectations.

A few years ago I remember seeing a miniature display next to a church in Rome that was a depiction of Bethlehem and it is full of every activity imaginable. There are families sitting down to supper, there are others in a pub, there are others coming from market, others finishing a day's work. The display was immense and showed all this human activity and there, in the midst of it all, you could almost miss it, are Joseph and Mary and the newborn Jesus - and almost no one around them in this whole scene is aware. There was so much going on that *I* might have missed it myself had someone with me not pointed it out. That is an Advent moment. It is not that the people are bad or blind, it is just that they are not attuned to hear and see or maybe even to look for the Advent hope offered to them.

The same can be true for us today. People will ask, "Are you ready for Christmas?" Which usually means, do you have your presents bought or your meals planned, decorations up or where your people are going to stay? There is activity all over the place in the hustle and bustle but what do we expect of Christmas? Do we expect temporary joy, and good feelings and presents and singing and Santa Claus and, of course, Christmas mass? Is that what Christmas means? What do we expect? Do we move to the realm of John the Baptist, wondering ... If the Messiah came, if the reign of God is upon us, then why am I in prison? Why are children gunned down in our streets and our schools? Why do people have to flee their homelands? Why are there so many suffering? So much division and negativity? *We* might ask, "*Are you the One or do we wait for another?*"

Advent hope is supposed to stir in us the expectation that something better is coming, something more, that will lift us up higher as the human race. And, it is to open our eyes and ears to see God working in us and around us now, giving us new legs to walk with. It is, to be sure, preparing to remember the birth of Jesus, but it doesn't stop there with the past. Advent hope reminds us that God is not done yet - with us or with our world. St. James calls us to patience, to "*make your hearts firm*" so that we don't become blind and deaf to that action of God around us. For if people missed his coming the first time, due to their busyness and expectations, who is to say we might not miss his coming now?