

# Msgr. Dennis Sheehan

## Homily Given on December 15, 2002

### Third Sunday of Advent - Liturgical Year B

Are you afraid of the dark? If you are one of the millions terrified of black, blind darkness, then this Advent gospel is for you. This week, I came across a piece written by a man who grew up in a remote rural area. It's really dark in the country. Listen to his memory: "How well I remember," he writes, "that long walk down our winding driveway as a small child. Even as a teenager I dreaded to make that walk at night as a friend let me out of the car, and I had to make the long trek in total black darkness. At the end of the drive though, as I came in sight of the house lights, I often heard my mother's reassuring question: 'Is that you?'" Nothing so tames the terror of the darkness as a light, a voice.

Another writer talked of the total dark in "spelunking", that is, the exploration of underground caves. An experienced guide led him and his party deep into the caverns under a Kentucky landscape. As they got deeper into the caves, a few at the rear got separated from the lights and guide at the front. Suddenly, it became totally dark and totally silent. Three or four of them huddled in terrified blackness, hopeful that someone would find them. Minutes seemed like hours, but, finally, a voice called out and they called back. The moments of darkness were sheer terror. Nothing so tames the terror of darkness as a light, a voice.

The people who flock to John the Baptist in today's Advent gospel are in the darkness. They are oppressed by Roman occupation. They are burdened by an uncaring religious state. They are poor, leaderless, dispirited. Then comes John the Baptist. A light is coming, says this fiery prophet.

But before there was light, there was a voice. The voice spoke in the darkness. That's John's identity. He says clearly to those who ask him: I'm not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet. I'm the voice.

Notice that John is waiting too. Like the people who come to him, John is in the darkness. He says that this one who is coming will be great. But he obviously doesn't have too many details. He can't say how this light is coming. He doesn't know when the Lord is coming. He can only say that his coming will be light. It will be the great event for which they are all waiting. That's the great and comforting part of John's message. His was a voice spoken into the darkness of his day and speaking into the darkness of our own. He is the watchman on the hill pointing to the sure hope of the coming dream.

Advent – and this Boston Advent in particular – is a time when the church is waiting. We're right now sitting in the dark, leaning forward to a hope we do not have, a future of which we are frighteningly uncertain.

John told the questioners of his day, the waiters and the watchers, "There is one among you whom you do not recognize." Some religious people think they know everything (I hope I'm not one). John knew what he did not know. He could only hope. He couldn't describe how his hope would be fulfilled. But he knew with fierce determination that his hope would not be disappointed.

In these Advent Sundays, nothing is described in much detail. Eventually, of course, at Christmas, our hope will be realized in great detail. But that is later, and now is now. Now there is only darkness, yearning, waiting, and expectation.

John, in a very real way blesses our life experience of darkness, of uncertainty, of anxious waiting. He says that's a good place to begin. The way to fulfillment begins in knowing we're not fulfilled. The way to light is first to admit we are in darkness. Ours is a world where everyone says, "I'm fine." It takes a kind of Advent courage to admit I'm not fine, to choose to hope and be open to something better.

Don't be afraid of the dark, cries John today. God is with you in the dark, even though you do not recognize it. Deliverance, rescue, is coming even though you don't know his name or see his face. Just know and admit that you are in darkness and you can't find your way by yourself. That realization, that cry, that waiting with open hands is itself the greatest grace this Advent can give you.

We Catholics in Boston need to hear John's message today. We are very upset by the chaos swirling around us and by the spectacle of a church debased by sin and seemingly in the dark about our future.

John says: you can't move from the darkness by yourself. Don't put second things first and flail your hands worrying about who or when or how. Keep calm in the darkness. Listen to the voice, "There is one among you whom you do not recognize." You have the Word of God. Hear it and take it to heart. You have the Eucharist – embrace it and live in communion with Jesus Christ. Keep focused, says John. The darkness is not the final word. The light is coming and almost here. Learn to look for Christ, to hear Christ, to embrace Christ. It is he – not an institution or a movement – for whom we wait in Advent – and he is here! Do you see him?