

“Now I am sending my messenger—he will prepare the way before me; and the lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple; the messenger of the covenant whom you desire—see, he is coming! says the LORD of hosts” (Mal 3:1). John the Baptist fulfilled the prophecy of the Old Testament Prophet Malachi that a prophet would herald the coming of the Messiah. John baptized with water and called the people of his time to repentance. John the Baptist points every generation to the Messiah. He calls us each of us to repent and to prepare for the second coming of Jesus.

Isaiah prophesied about the deliverance of Israel. “Then the eyes of the blind shall see, and the ears of the deaf be opened; then the lame shall leap like a stag, and the mute tongue sing for joy” (35: 5-6). While the Israelites in captivity saw deliverance from the Babylonian exile, the bigger fulfillment of the prophecy was that the promised savior would come. Jesus delivers all of humanity from slavery to sin.

The miracles of Jesus are always connected with faith. He helped the physically blind to see in order to help those with sight to see through the eyes of faith. He helped the deaf to hear so that those with hearing might listen to his message. With each infant baptism, the priest or deacon uses an Aramaic phrase, “Ephphatha, Be Open,” that the newly baptized child will grow in knowledge and experience of the faith in order to be open to hearing the message of the Gospel and to proclaiming it to others.

John sent two of his own disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (Lk 7:19) This seems a little odd at first. As an infant in the womb, John leapt for joy at the presence of Jesus. Like a good lawyer, he already knows the answer to the question before it is asked. The disciples of John will have their own faith tested when John the Baptist is arrested, imprisoned, and tragically executed for speaking truth to power. John is helping his disciples in advance of his own arrest to understand that all is not lost with his death. The Messiah is with them and they should transfer their allegiance to Jesus.

When John’s disciples left, Jesus confirms that John is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi. “This is the one about whom scripture says: ‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, he will prepare your way before you’” (Lk 8:27). By extension, Jesus also confirms that he is the Messiah. Jesus goes on to say: “I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (28). Jesus is calling all his followers to help build up the kingdom of God. John fulfilled his role in helping to prepare for the coming of the Lord. Each of us, followers of Jesus, has a mission to share the good news, to draw others to Christ, and to provide witness.

John lost his life by being faithful to his prophetic mission. Indeed, each of the prophets paid a price for being faithful to God’s plan for them. By extension, Jesus is warning his own disciples that his journey to Jerusalem will involve the ultimate sacrifice. “Ephphatha, Be Open.” If we are truly open to the mission God has for us, then we will see sacrifice and suffering. Where we see others suffering, we are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and engage in corporal and spiritual works of mercy. As regards to our own sacrifice and suffering, we must embrace it in faith, uniting our cross to his and helping Jesus in his mission of redeeming the world.

With the pandemic, our own generation is seeing suffering on a global scale reminiscent of the Spanish flu from a century ago. We need look no farther than the Iditarod to Nome Serum Run to know that help is on the way. Although a vaccine is now in its initial stages of distribution, suffering and death are likely to continue for another 6 months or better. It is easy to be discouraged and to live in fear. Others choose denial and this is most dangerous for the strong

can transmit the virus without even knowing it to the weak and vulnerable. “We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a dirge, but you did not weep” (Jn 7:32).

Jesus was well aware of his impending passion and death. He did not let that slow him down from reaching out to others with love, mercy, and miracles. He continued to help the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to leap, the mute to sing for joy. In faith, and with the help of God, we are called to help to build up the kingdom of God. Amidst the suffering and sacrifice of the pandemic, opportunities abound to feed the hungry, to forgive those who trespass against us, and to witness to the healing power of Christ who has conquered sin, that which is more deadly than any virus known to our times.