Advent 3(Year A)

[RCL] Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11; Psalm 146:4-9 or Canticle 15

Advent is a season of waiting, expectation, and preparation for the coming of the Messiah. But who is this Messiah?

John the Baptist seems to have certain ideas. In today's Gospel, after hearing what Jesus did, John sends his question to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" It seems John may have doubts about the identity of Jesus.

But in last week's Gospel, John introduces Jesus and confidently declares: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John the Baptist knows perfectly well who Jesus is. So, why is he questioning? John's circumstances have changed--John now finds himself in prison and it appears his imprisonment has caused him to doubt Jesus. After all the powerful Messiah who he proclaimed earlier is not saving John from prison, and the one who is supposed to take away the sin from the world is not taking sin away from Herod. Who could blame John the Baptist or anybody else for that for doubting in such situation?

After hearing John's question, Jesus does not answer directly but tells John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,

the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matthew 11:4-6)

Uncertain, scary, and helpless times can shake us up and cause doubts in our faith. Today's Gospel is a good reflection of our spiritual journey. We can be like John the Baptist. When we are moved by the Holy Spirit, we vow to follow God. It is very clear and true. Or when we receive blessings, we are sure Jesus is our Saviour. But when we face adversity and disasters, we question if Jesus really is the Saviour. We question why bad things happen, why God is not there for us, and doubt even if God really exists.

It is easy to believe when things are going well for us—it is a lot harder when we are beset by troubles.

Rather than provide a clear and direct answer to John's question, "are you the one" Jesus tells John and his disciples to look around; to look and see what is happening; to stop and to listen to the good news that is being preached.

And so it is with us; when we doubt and fret we get so wrapped up in our own personal problems that we fail to notice God's work in the world—we get overwhelmed by our circumstances. This of course is one of the ironies of this time of year—Advent is supposed to be a time of patient preparation, a time to reflect on our lives and repent for the times when we have failed to live up to the person God would have us be; a time to pray and to study the word of God. But for many of us this is not a calm and reflective

time of year, but a time of constant busyness; a time of frantic stress as we get overwhelmed by the demands upon our time, our energy and our pocketbooks; this is not a time of hopeful expectation for many of us, but a dreaded time to be survived and endured. Like John in prison, we feel trapped and despair. And as a consequence, we forget to look for God, to look for God in our own lives and the lives of those around us; in our stress, we are unable to see or recognize the works of God in the world around us or to hear the good news of promises of love, compassion, forgiveness and healing fulfilled. We become so wrapped up in ourselves and our own problems that God disappears and no longer seems real or possible for us.

But if only we observed this holy season of Advent as we are supposed to, we might just discover that yes God's promises are being fulfilled all around us; and that so same promises could be fulfilled in our own lives if we let them; if we only paused to stop, look and listen. We need to free ourselves of the prisons of our own making and take the time simply to be, to be with God. And if we do, we will discover that we are not alone—that God is there is the midst of our busyness, our despair, our hopelessness, our struggles and that God is indeed active in our world and in the lives of others.

The third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday—Gaudete means rejoice. When we can see and hear God's presence – Emmanuel, in good times and bad times, if we but look and listen—and that is certainly cause to rejoice. Amen.