

Advent III December 17, 2023 Year B

Advent is a season of renewal and hope. The prophet Isaiah says that through the anointing of God's spirit he has been sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners and to bind up the broken hearted. This is very good news indeed to those who are disappointed in their fate and despondent.

This promise is for Israel. They shall not always be faint in spirit and mourning. God will give them the oil of gladness. They will rebuild the ruined cities. God will make a new everlasting covenant with them, and their descendants shall be known among the nations. All who see them will acknowledge that they are people whom the Lord has blessed. This is what God told Abraham – that the nations will be blessed by his offspring.

Isaiah proclaims the year of the Lord's favor and the day of God's vengeance. The Lord loves justice. His vengeance is against wrongdoing. But notice that vengeance only lasts a day while the Lord's favor lasts much longer. Maybe purging of wrongdoing is a necessary prelude to the Lord's favor.

This reading reminds me of the year of Jubilee. Every 50 years the Israelites' original land grant that Moses gave them – their inheritance – was restored to them, even if it had been sold. Slaves were set free, and everyone's property was returned. The people had a fresh start every 50 years. I don't know if the people of Israel ever kept a year of Jubilee but the principle is there in Scripture.

This passage from Isaiah was the one that Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth when he began his ministry. (It's in Luke 14:18 & 19) He said "the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he told them that this scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. He knew what his mission was.

In what ways are we blind or captive? Do we need Jesus' healing touch to free us?

What does it mean to rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances? When we pray in chapel there is an opportunity to give thanks to God. I may give thanks to God for the gift of another day. After that I am mostly silent. But I have a lot to be thankful for. I am living a privileged life. I have abundant food, appropriate clothing and shelter. All my needs are met. Jesus, help me not to take these things for granted. I live in a beautiful place. God has given me my Sisters in CSJB for whom I am grateful. I have a God who loves me even when I am unappreciative and when I fall short of his best for me. God has called me to live in Community and has given me the gifts I need to persevere. God has helped me use the opportunities. I have to minister to others. He has helped me to discover and use the gifts he has put within me.

I find, when I pray, that I almost always think about what is happening in the world and the need for intercession. But prayer isn't only about intercession. It is also about rejoicing in our relationship with Jesus. If we think about it, we can give thanks no matter what our circumstances happen to be. Let us make a habit of giving thanks to God more often.

The Christmas Story in St. John's Gospel is completely different from that of the Synoptic Gospels. There is no inn, no stable, no baby in the manger. There are no shepherds, angels, or wise men. John begins his gospel by emphasizing the preexistence of Jesus before the incarnation. Jesus was the Word of God, the

self-expression of God. He is the Light coming into the world. We are so used to hearing this that we may not realize how radical it is. The incarnation changes absolutely everything in our relationship with God. The New Interpreters' Bible says this: "The Word becoming flesh is the decisive event in human history because the incarnation changes God's relationship to humanity and humanity's relationship to God. It means that human beings can see, hear, and know God in ways never before possible."

So who is John the Baptist in all this? He is a witness. He knows who Jesus is and by contrast who he is. The Gospel writer says John came to testify to the Light but he was not the Light. He is asked if he is the Messiah: he says no. What about being Elijah or the Prophet: no again. John quotes Isaiah to his interrogators. He is the one crying out in the wilderness to make the way straight for the one coming after him who is greater than he.

We Sisters of John the Baptist are also witnesses to Jesus. We witness our faith by pointing people in the direction of the one who is greater than ourselves. The need to cultivate the humility of our patron and testify to what Jesus has done for us.