

December 17, 2023
3rd Sunday of Advent
John 1:6-8, 19-28

A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent out priests and Levites to him to ask him, "*Who are you?*" He admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Messiah." So they asked him, "*What are you then? Are you Elijah?*" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "*Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?*" He said: "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as Isaiah the prophet said."

Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Background:

John's father, Zechariah, was a highly respected rural priest. In a society where a person's role and status in the community was largely determined by one's family, John was acting out of character. He should have been acting like a respectable member of a priestly family and following in his father's footsteps. However, his behavior was more like one of the disgruntled priests who became separated from the aristocratic priests of temple in Jerusalem. Their wealth and lifestyle alienated them from some of the rural priests. John's appearance and way of life seemed more typical of those who had assumed the role of a prophet, living apart from the religious leaders of the day.

Like a prophet, John spoke the desire of God: that they should live more faithfully their relationship with God. John's baptism was a sign of a person's repentance. Baptisms were common and had a variety of meanings. Naaman's washing in the Jordan would have been understood as a kind of baptism (2 Kings 5:14). A high priest was required to participate in a rite of purification before and after rites of atonement (Leviticus 16:4). Women were required to perform a form of baptism after their menstruation (Leviticus 15). So, it is not so unusual that John's presence has raised some questions for the religious authorities.

The priests and Pharisees have come to John to discover who he is. Who is this person, out in the desert, calling people to repentance and baptizing? He tells them that he is not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet. At this time, there was no clear understanding of who the Messiah might be or even what kind of role the Messiah would play. The term messiah means "anointed one." In their history, the Jews had anointed people for a variety of reasons. Kings, priests and some prophets had been anointed.

There were those among John's followers, and among the people, who believed that the Baptist himself was the Messiah. Nevertheless, John denied that he was the Messiah no matter how one understood that term. He did say that there was one among them so great that he was not worthy to undo his sandals, the role of one's lowliest servant.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is it you hope when we talk about the coming reign of God?
2. Have there been times when people expected a certain kind of behavior or ability from you because they knew your family?

3. Have you encountered people who you find difficult to understand, or who cause you to be confused by their words or actions?
4. The religious leaders of the day went out to John, asking, “Who are you?” If you were asked this same question today, how would you respond?
5. John’s behavior caused confusion because it did not match who the authorities believed he was, the son of Zechariah. Are you aware of places where your behavior may cause confusion for those who think they know you?
6. This Gospel has been selected by the church for the third Sunday of Advent. How does this point to the coming establishment of the reign of God?
7. Can you take some time to talk to God about how you see your life pointing to God, your need for repentance, or some other self-awareness that arose within you from this Gospel?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to fr.paul.gallagher.ofm@gmail.com.

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscclalledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

Excerpts from the Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America, second typical edition © 2001, 1998, 1997, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. Used with permission. All rights reserved. No portion of this text may be reproduced by any means without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Please include this information when printing or forwarding.

Excerpts from the readings for December 17, 2023, the Third Sunday of Advent

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,
to announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God.
I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul;
for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice,
like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem, like a bride bedecked with her jewels.
As the earth brings forth its plants, and a garden makes its growth spring up,
so will the Lord God make justice and praise spring up before all the nations.

My soul rejoices in my God. My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: The Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.
He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he has remembered his promise of mercy.

Brothers and sisters: Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.
In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you.
Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances.
Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil.
May the God of peace make you holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body,
be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.

A man named John was sent from God. He came to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.
And this is the testimony of John.

When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, "Who are you?" He admitted, "I am not the Christ." So they asked him, "Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?" He said: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'make straight the way of the Lord,'" as Isaiah the prophet said." Some Pharisees asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Excerpts from Isaiah 61:1-11; Luke 1:46-54; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; and John 1:6-8, 19-28

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for December 17th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. This third Sunday of Advent is also known as Gaudete Sunday; the word Gaudete translates to "rejoice." The Gospel from John is the only reading for this Gaudete Sunday that does not refer specifically to rejoicing. The Gospel instead has a different direct tie to the first reading. In the Gospel, "A man named John was sent from God. He came to testify, so that all might believe through him." He said to the inquiring priests and Levites, "I am not the Christ. There is one whom you do not recognize coming after me." The other readings all have references to rejoicing, and of one being sent to herald good news. In the first reading, Isaiah says, "The spirit of God is upon me, he has sent me to bring glad tidings... I rejoice heartily in the Lord; in my God is the joy of my soul." The responsorial this week is not from a psalm as would be typical. Instead, the verses are from Mary's Magnificat, which is in Luke chapter, one, and the refrain, although similar to the first lines of the Magnificat, is actually from the first reading: "My soul rejoices in my God." In the second reading, from the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes, "Rejoice always. Do not quench the Spirit. May God make you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

This week's Gospel from John is in large part a repeat of last week's Gospel that was from the beginning of Mark. This one, too, relates John the Baptist's role in preparing the way of the Lord. It again characterizes him as the messenger that Isaiah wrote of in the Scriptures. To those who ask, "Who are you?" John the Baptist replies, "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'make straight the way of the Lord.'" John further advises, "There is one among you whom you do not recognize, one mightier than I who is coming after me."

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!