

December 13, 2020
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 following in his father's footsteps as a respectable member of a priestly class. Neither is his behavior like one of the disgruntled priests who became separated from the aristocratic priests of Jerusalem. The wealth and lifestyle of the Jerusalem priests alienated some. Instead, John's appearance and way of life seemed more typical of one 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 the people should live their relationship with God more faithfully. His 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). High priests were required to participate in rites of purification before and after rites of atonement (Leviticus 16:4). Women were required to perform a form of baptism after their period of 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, nor Elijah, nor 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 who believed that the Baptist himself was the Messiah. Nevertheless, John denies that he is the Messiah, no matter how one understands that term. John announces that there is one among them so great that he is not worthy to undo his sandals, the role of one's lowliest servant.

Reflection Questions:

1. Are you aware of times or situations when your behavior was not in harmony with your family's expectations?
2. Do you know people who have had to break from their family in order to respond faithfully to what they believed God was calling them to do?
3. Who are the people today who seem to see the presence of God even in difficult times?

4. What changes have the world pandemic brought to your life? Are any of those changes helping you to live your life more aware of your relationship to God, others, and people throughout the world?
5. John's baptism was a sign of one's repentance. What are the signs that you have changed relationships to yourself and others?
6. Can you talk with God now about your ability to recognize and even praise God in the good and difficult times of your life?

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 annemarie.lom@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.

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Excerpts from the readings for December 13, 2020, 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

Reflection by Joe Thiel:

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for December 13th, the Third Sunday of Advent, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel for this week, from John, has many similarities to last week's gospel from Mark. Each comes from the first chapter of its respective gospel, setting up John the Baptist at the beginning of the story. Each links John the Baptist to Isaiah's prophecy of "one crying out in the desert, 'make straight the way of the Lord.'" In each, the Baptist tells of a mightier one to come, whose sandals he is unworthy of loosening, and whose baptism will be different than his own. John writes that the Baptist was "sent by God, for testimony, so that all might believe through him." The other three readings all indicate that this word of one who is to come is news to rejoice over. The first reading from Isaiah says, "The Lord has sent me to bring glad tidings, to announce a year of favor and a day of vindication; I rejoice heartily in the Lord." Instead of the usual psalm, the Responsorial uses Mary's words from the Magnificat, from Luke's chapter 1: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior." And in the second reading, from his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes, "Rejoice always. May the God of peace make you perfectly holy, preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."