

Advent 3A 2013

The Surprising Presence of God

Advent teaches us many lessons. It teaches us that God is present to our lives when we least expect it. It teaches us that God is present to our lives, even when God seems to be absent. It teaches us that God is present to our lives in moments of sorrow and disappointment as well as in moment of joy and success.

The story of John the Baptist is a case in point. In last week's gospel, we heard John proclaiming the coming of the Christ. Aware that the Messiah was about to make his appearance, John warned us to prepare a way for the Lord by changing and reforming our lives. In last week's gospel, John was confident that God would manifest his power in a fearsome day of fire and retribution.

But in today's gospel we find a very different picture of John. John, the last and the greatest of all the prophets, is now in prison. The days of his preaching have ended, and he now sits in a dungeon still waiting for the coming of the Messiah. But when his disciples tell him what Jesus is doing, John is puzzled. Is this the Messiah that I was waiting for? Is this the long-expected Savior of the world? Is this the One who has come to judge the world in justice and righteousness?

God was not acting in the way John imagined He would. Jesus was not the kind of Messiah John expected him to be. John was waiting for a powerful judge

who would condemn sinners. But instead of a powerful judge, Jesus appeared forgiving and healing sinners. John was waiting for the Day of Judgment, but instead of the day of judgment, Jesus appeared, healing the blind and the lame, the sick and the infirm. John was looking for a powerful Messiah, but instead of a powerful judge Jesus appeared as a gentle and unassuming Savior.

Like all of us, God was surprised by the unexpected way in which God appeared in the world of his day. Like all of us, John was caught off guard by God's presence in Jesus Christ.

God is present to us in so many ways, every day. God is present in the stranger who unexpectedly enters our life. God is present in the neighbor we see every day. God is present in our moments of our sorrow and joy. God is present at those moments we least expect. God is especially present in those moments we think He is far away. God is present every day, if we open our hearts to his saving grace.

God has entered my life, when I least expected to find God: a chance encounter with a parishioner that leads to an important conversation, the unanticipated confession of someone who has been away from Christ and his church for years, the joy and the excitement of someone who has found Christ for the first time.

Like the wind that we hear but cannot see, God is an allusive presence. We rarely find God where we think God ought to be; and we always find God where we least expect God to be. This is because God is an allusive presence who speaks to us in events and people we think of no account.

John the Baptist, the greatest of all the prophets, discovered this allusive presence of God in Jesus, the unexpected Messiah. He discovered the presence of God where he least expected to find it. And so it is with us this Advent season. Christ comes into our lives in surprising and unexpected ways, in people and places we least expect to find Him. As we enter final weeks of this Advent Season we ask for the grace to open our hearts to the allusive and unexpected presence of God.