

3rd Sunday of Advent - B
Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11;
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24;
John 1:6-8, 19-28
Little Flower - 12/17/23

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Third Sunday of Advent. Today is commonly called Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* is a Latin word that means rejoice. Instead of violet vestments, today priests wear rose vestments. Instead of a violet Advent candle, today we lit the rose candle.

This Sunday takes its name from the traditional Entrance Antiphon which comes from Paul's Letter to the Philippians: "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. The Lord is near*" [4:4-5]. We rejoice today because we are now at the mid-point of Advent. Christmas is almost here.

In today's Gospel, John's mission becomes very clear. According to the Prologue of John's Gospel, John the Baptist came "*to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*" He takes as his mission statement the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*" His answers to the people's questions clearly manifest him as the precursor as he tells them he is not the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet.

This reading suggests some practical implications for our lives. John the Baptist knew who he was and who he was not, what he was and what he was not. I remember reading one time that two big temptations we face are trying to be more than human or less than human rather than becoming the-best-version-of-ourselves. Also, John the Baptist recognized and defined his vocation from Scripture. He knew his vocation came from God. Like John, we need to seek our vocation in God. Instead of always asking what do I want to do with my life or what do I want to do next in my life, we might better ask what God is calling me to do. Third, we too are called to witness to the light. As Jesus told us, "*You are the light of the world.....your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father*" [Mt. 5:14a, 16]. Like John, we are challenged to point to someone else, namely Christ.

In Luke Chapter 4, Jesus chooses the first part of today's first reading as his mission statement: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord*" [18-19]. What I find fascinating about Jesus' quotation of Isaiah is the absence of the phrase "*to heal the brokenhearted.*" I think I once read that Jesus omitted that phrase because it was less about what he did and more about who he was as healer, reconciler, and peacemaker.

However, the phrase has relevance for us. We all know so many people who are brokenhearted for all kinds of reasons. One of the primary reasons for brokenheartedness is loss. We all know people who have suffered great losses. We ourselves have also suffered losses. We help heal the brokenhearted by being present for them, by listening attentively to them, and by being compassionate, i.e., sensitive to their real needs, both spoken and unspoken, and then responsive to those needs. We can become healers of their hearts.

My brothers and sisters, today's second reading struck me in a way it never has before. We often complicate the Christian life. Paul tells us in very simple terms how to live as Christians and, therefore, as witnesses to the light. He tells us to rejoice always. Those who rejoice always give powerful witness to Christ and the power of his resurrection. We are to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all circumstances. We are to allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit. We are to refrain from every kind of evil. So simple, yet so hard. Perhaps this is why Paul writes, "*May the God of peace make you perfectly holy.*" Even if we do everything right, we are not able to make ourselves holy.