

HOMILY FOR THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT-DECEMBER 13, 2020

Advent: God scattering sparkles of joy

READINGS: Isaiah 61: 1—2a, 10-11;

Responsorial Psalm-Gospel of Luke 1;

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24;

Gospel of John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Did you see the Disney Family Holiday Sing Along show on the ABC television network? The show was aired a couple of weeks ago with Ryan Seacrest as the host. The show featured several singers, dancers, and other artists. There was singing of Christmas music, dancing, and other performances with animated scenes. The host mentioned that the holiday special has been put together to bring joy to everyone. Seacrest acknowledged that this year has been very difficult for all of us because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He hoped that in this time of uncertainties the show might be able to lift up our Christmas spirit. The music was amazing, the dancing was great and the children who participated in the show inspired us. One of the singers led us in singing the popular traditional Christmas song-"Joy to the World". In fact, the show reminded viewers that Christmas was on its way and with its spirit of joy.

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent and it is traditionally referred to as "Gaudete" Sunday or Rejoice Sunday. Today we light the third candle on the Advent wreath-- the rose-coloured candle symbolizing the uniqueness of this Third Sunday of Advent. Today's liturgy provides us with three beautiful readings that set the tone of joy that characterizes this Sunday. We begin with the first reading from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. The writer of this part of the Book of Isaiah is referred to as the "Third" Isaiah who lived at the time of the return of the exiles. The prophet begins his prophecy by proclaiming that, "the spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me". Isaiah described how God has clothed him with "a garment of salvation and has covered him with "the robe of righteousness". The prophet used these words to describe how God would transform the lives of the people in spite of their initial hardships and discouragement that the Israelites experienced after the exile. The prophet described how God would offer the returnees a new beginning and a new life. According to Isaiah, the return of the Israelites would eventually bear fruit and therefore the people had good reason to rejoice. The justice of God would be established and the mercy of God would be evident to all-"God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations".

The tone of joy in the prophecy of Isaiah leads us to the second reading. In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encouraged the early Christians to be joyful always, to pray continually and to give thanks. He also exhorted the early Christians to live in faith and in hope as people expecting the coming of Jesus Christ.

The theme of joy that we heard in the first and second readings seems to be absent in today's Gospel reading from John. Today's passage is also about John the Baptist. Last

Sunday we heard about John the Baptist from the Gospel of Mark. The passages from both Gospels-Mark and John feature the main figure John the Baptist as giving testimony about the Messiah. However, in today's passage, the Evangelist John describes John the Baptist in a different context and in a unique way to develop his theology of the Messiah and of John the Baptist.

As part of our reflection, let us examine some of the images and expressions used by the Evangelist to understand what the passage offers us. John the Baptist is referred to as "a man sent from God". The expression, "a man sent from God" indicates that John the Baptist has already been chosen by God to witness to the Son of God. The first question from the religious authorities to John the Baptist was direct- "Who are you"? This first question and the answer that John the Baptist gave led to further speculations about the expected return of some of the prophets before the coming of the messiah. For example, according to a prophecy of Malachi, the Jewish people were awaiting the prophet Elijah who had been taken up to heaven. Elijah was expected to return to prepare the way for the Lord (Mal. 3:1, 23).

However, John the Baptist described himself as, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way for the Lord". In these words taken from the Book of Isaiah, John the Baptist described his mission-- to prepare the way for the Lord. The roads of the time were not paved, or even surfaced, unless a King or a conqueror was to make a journey. Then, repairmen would straighten the roads over which the Great One's litter would be carried. A litter is a means of transportation used by kings and emperors carried by slaves or large animals. The word "baptizing" was a ritual that unbelievers who were coming into the Jewish faith had to do: wash to be clean enough to be God's people. However, John the Baptist was baptizing Jews who already had embraced the Jewish faith. The people considered the baptism of John the Baptist as special and therefore they thought John the Baptist was the Messiah. John the Baptist described the identity of the Messiah by saying that he "was not worthy to untie the thong of the sandal" of the Messiah. The untying of a master's sandals was a slave's work; the rabbis have a saying that a disciple could do anything for his master but untying his sandals because the job was of very low status.

What do the three readings tell us as we continue on our journey of Advent? When we do the three readings in the light of the Season of Advent, we can discern that they talk about the coming of Jesus. In the first reading, Isaiah described his role in the restoration of Jerusalem when he says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me". The proclamations from today's first reading were the same proclamations that Jesus read to the people in the synagogue (Luke 4). Christians see the spiritual fulfillment of these proclamations in the person and ministry of Jesus. In today's Gospel reading, John the Baptist also identified himself not as the Messiah, but as the fulfillment of long-ago prophecies, as the one who came to prepare God's people for the coming of the Messiah.

How are we preparing ourselves and how are we helping others to prepare as we anticipate with joy the coming of Jesus on Christmas Day? Today is Rejoice Sunday because Christmas is approaching. We rejoice because God's promises to us have been fulfilled in Jesus. How do we live in the spirit of joy?

Due to COVID-19 and its impact on the events of our celebration of Advent leading to Christmas, we might have the tendency to think that this Advent Season lacks its traditional spirit of joy. Yet, the artists of the Family Sing Along Christmas television show that I mentioned earlier showed us that we could still bring joy to others in this challenging time through our actions of love. It was reported that because of the COVID-19 safety protocols for gathering, the performers had to work harder. They supported each other and showed concern for the other to produce a great show full of joy. The artists performed with love. Today's readings remind us that as Christians, when we strive to witness to Christ through our actions based on love, we can bring joy into our world. As our Advent journey brings us closer to Christmas, let us turn to God to scatter sparkles of joy in our hearts so that we may live as people of hope and joy.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note: Homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance.