

The Third Station of Advent: An Encounter with John the Baptist

by Tom Redmond, SM

When we began these weekly Advent reflections I offered the metaphor of Stations to help us reflect on themes from the readings of each Sunday. On the first Sunday of Advent we listened to Jesus' words from Mark 13, "be aware, be alert." The first Station of Advent called us to a stance of active awareness. At the second Station of Advent the Prophet Isaiah consoled us with a message that was originally given to Israel in Exile. In comforting words the prophet proclaimed, "Like a shepherd God will care for you, heal your wounds, and bring you home." At this second Station of Advent we paused to reflect on how we have received such comfort and how we have shared this comfort: the gift received is the gift we pass on to others.

Before we come to the third Station of Advent I would like to comment on the cycle of liturgical readings. We know Advent begins the new liturgical year; it is then we also move to a new cycle of Sunday readings for Mass. In this three-year cycle, called "A, B, and C," we read through each of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew in Year A, Mark in Year B, and Luke in Year C. This three-year rotation offers us a rich diversity of Scripture readings, where the first reading from Hebrew Scripture matches a theme from the Gospel, the second reading walks us through the New Testament letters, and then of course the Gospel as the third reading.

From a lens different from the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the Church provides an opportunity for us to listen to the fourth Gospel in its unique insights into the person and mission of Jesus. So, on the second Sunday of Ordinary Time (the first Sunday in Ordinary Time being the Baptism of Jesus), the second half of Lent, and the Easter season we listen to John's Gospel. The rest of the Sunday Gospel is from the current cycle—A, B, or C.

This supplement of the fourth Gospel into the Sunday cycle is rich, only the Gospel of John tells us of the wedding feast at Cana and the transformation of water into wine (Jesus' first miracle—revealing his glory), the nighttime conversation with Nicodemus and the need to be born from above, the raising of Lazarus, the extended monologue by Jesus in chapters 14 thru 17 (especially chapter 17 with its affective priestly prayer of Jesus), and the presence of Mary and the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross. Several commentators reflect on the uniqueness of the fourth Gospel and its approach to presenting Jesus, or as William Barclay points out, the fourth Gospel holds "none of the parable stories Jesus told which are such a priceless part of the other three Gospels."¹

In this Year B, the Gospel for the third Sunday of Advent is from John with an extended look at the Baptist; next week the Gospel is from Luke as we contemplate the annunciation to Mary. It is not that the Gospel of Mark does

not hold Advent themes, but it is the Gospels of John and Luke that offer specific insights into Advent annunciations.

At this third Station of Advent I suggest three “annunciations” for us to consider. The first Advent annunciation involves Zechariah, the father of the Baptist. Luke’s Gospel vividly describes the scene in the Temple: the Angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah that, even in old age, he and his wife Elizabeth are to bear a son to be named John, who, in the spirit of Elijah will prepare a way before the Lord. Through his clarifying question—“How can I know this?—Zechariah becomes speechless; in a literal way this is beyond words! St. Augustine has a wonderful insight on this in a sermon we read in the Office of Readings on June 24, the Birthday of John.

Zechariah, is silent and loses his voice until John, the precursor of the Lord is born and restores his voice. . . .
At John’s arrival Zechariah’s voice is released . . . Zechariah’s tongue is loosened because a voice is born . . . the voice is John, but the Lord in the beginning was the word. John was a voice that lasted only for a time; Christ, the word in the beginning is eternal.

Following the birth of the child, Zechariah proclaims the following in his Canticle, which we pray each morning in the Liturgy of the Hours:

You my child shall be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,
to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness
of their sins. (Lk 1:76)

Through Sunday’s Gospel, from John 1, we hear Zechariah’s blessing enfolded as we read of the person of the Baptist, he is sent by God to be a witness to the light that all might come to believe through him (verses 6-8). Verses 19-28 tell of the Baptist’s message and identity—who he is and who he is not—“I am not the Christ, I am not Elijah, I am not the prophet. I am a voice that cries out in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make rough ways smooth.’”

Not only does John announce the coming of the Lord but he also proclaims a truth about life and relationships. In Luke 3:10 the Baptist replies specifically to the question, “What must we do?” He replies, “share, be just in your dealings with others.”

Each of the synoptic Gospels tells of the Baptist’s annunciations to Herod in his incestuous marriage. Herod imprisoned John to keep him quiet, and

Herod's wife devised a plan to kill him; yet this would not silence the message of truth. In a selection from the Office of Readings (on August 29, the Feast of the Beheading of John) there is an insightful line from a homily by St. Bede. The Venerable states that Herod "had demanded not that John should deny Christ, but only that he should keep silent about the truth." What the Baptist said about himself at the beginning of the Fourth Gospel completes his life: he is a voice crying out as a witness to the light, as a witness to truth.

Now for the third annunciation at this Station of Advent. . . . In the Collect at Mass on this third Sunday of Advent, we ask God for the grace to "celebrate our salvation in solemn worship and glad rejoicing." We ask God that we be a people of hope and joy—this is our annunciation to the world! As Marianists, community is a core element to our lives. Father Joe Stefanelli has a wonderful insight about this in his deeply reflective work, *Our Marianist Heritage*. In Chapter 5 on community Father Joe writes:

. . . it's not only the life of the individual Christian that is to manifest and to express in some way the relationship of the son to the father, but it is the life of the whole community. . . . the community must also enter into this conformity with Christ and express [a] relationship to the Father. The perfection of Christ is simply too great to be achieved by [one person] alone. [We] need mutual support, encouragement from [each other]. Not only is this perfection so sublime and so rich, but it is so diversified, the possibilities of expression are so great. . . . The diversification is so great, the fullness of Christ is better produced in a community, by a community.²

Some Thoughts for Prayer and Reflection

We have pondered three annunciations at this Station of Advent:

- ❖ to and by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist;
- ❖ by John the Baptist to the people of his time, to Herod, and to us;
- ❖ by us as a witness of joy in God's presence among us.

1. In each of these annunciations what is stirring in the mind and heart of God?
2. In our annunciation to the world, how do you see community enhancing your message, your witness?

Endnotes

1. Barclay, William. "The Gospel of John," *The New Daily Study Bible*, vol. I, 2001, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 2.
2. Stefanelli, SM, Joseph. *Our Marianist Heritage*, 1974, Marianist Resources Commission, Monograph Series, doc. 16, pp. 81-84.

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