

Third Sunday of Advent

Year A

Isa 35: 1-6, 10

Psalm 146

James 5: 7-10

Matthew 11: 2-11

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Jesus sometimes says things that sound strange.

Remember the time they told Jesus his mother and relatives wanted to speak with him? And he asks, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?” What strange words from Jesus! “Who is my mother?” indeed! Is this what we would expect from Jesus? What gives?

Wasn't it Jesus – wasn't he one who said we must not allow human traditions to supersede God's command, Honor your father and mother? Didn't he set aside the fact that his “time had not yet come” in order to fulfill his own mother's request at Cana's wedding feast? And even more -- Isn't his mother the one whom he, his Father, and their Spirit had preserved free of all sin so that she could be the mother of the Messiah?

So, what is this “Who is my mother?” That sounds really strange.

Same kind of thing today: Jesus asks, “What did you go out to the desert to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, he says, and more than a prophet.... There is no one born of woman greater than he,” than the one you went out to see in the desert – no one greater than John the Baptist.

But then, look what Jesus says next: solemnly and emphatically he goes on, “The least one in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John,” greater than this “more than a prophet.” What!?! But isn't John in God's Kingdom? Wasn't he allowed to enter?

Consider this: Look back at what Jesus says when they tell him his mother wants to talk with him – Who is my mother? and all. How does Jesus answer his own question? Who, then, are his sisters and brothers, and mother?

My mother and brothers and sisters, he says, are “those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

Who, of all people, heard the word of God and kept it, believed it, said yes to it, cherished it in her heart? Was it not the young woman who heard that word, brought by the angel Gabriel, and said such a sincere Yes to it that Gabriel's greeting was justified: “full of grace,” “most highly favored daughter” – wasn't she the one who is the very model of hearing God's word and keeping it?

It is indeed the one who received and kept God's word, not only for nine months, but forever. It is not just those nine months that make Mary an exemplar of holiness; it is all the years of her life.

St Augustine says that before Mary conceived Christ in her womb she had already conceived him in her heart. She heard God's word so completely and kept it so faithfully that she was ready to receive the incarnate Word into her womb where she would keep him for the first nine months of his earthly life. Nine months she was to keep him in her womb. All her life – and all of eternal life – she has kept him in her heart.

John is like that, too. More than a prophet – the prophet of prophets – the last of those

who foretold the Messiah's coming; a striking figure, clothed in no fine and comfortable garments, living, as Jesus says, in no rich and comfortable house.

But it is not his ministry, not his prophecy, his preaching, his words that, in the end, make him great. His preaching does, of course, make him famous, for his message is the very center of all creation's history. His words resound throughout Judea and Galilee and to the ends of the earth, for they are the message of Good News. Two thousand years later we quote him, we tell his story again and again. Even now it is he who calls out to us in 2004: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"

But John is not great just because he tells us to prepare the way of the Lord; that makes him famous maybe, gets his name in lights on this third Advent Sunday. But all those words of prophecy, all the striking presentation in the desert does not get John into God's Kingdom.

And that, too, is good news – because it opens up for us the way to God's Kingdom.

You and I, we cannot conceive God in our womb as Mary did. We are almost certainly not called to go off to the desert beyond the Jordan River, get dressed in camel's hair and eat locusts.

But we can do what Mary did for many years before those nine months and what she has done every moment since. Remember St Augustine's words: We who cannot conceive Christ in our womb, can most certainly conceive him, give life to him in our hearts – in prayer, in devotion, in love, and in this almost-Christmas season, in just the sheer joy of knowing and feeling and celebrating what God has done for us and for our world.

And John? John is in God's Kingdom for the same basic reason that Mary is, and for the same reason you and I can be. It is not that he preached to others: that's not what matters most. It is what he, like Mary, cherished in his own heart the word that he received and kept, the word he was faithful to. That's what makes him one of Jesus' "brothers and sisters, and mother."

Locusts? Wild honey? Living in the desert? No, that may not be the way of life for us. But to look for, to long for the coming of the Messiah, for the One who will bring salvation and justice for all those who trust in the Lord – that we can do. That, in fact, is what the Church calls us to do this Advent season.

But there is one more thing. Both John and Mary acted on the hope and promise they cherished in their heart. When the people went out into the desert, there was indeed something there for them to see. Not a reed swaying to and fro in the breeze, but a man bursting with the Good News, unable to contain himself, a voice crying out in the desert place: Prepare the way of the Lord. A man, in short, who was indeed preparing that way, making straight the highways for our God.

The first words of James today tell us how: Submit to God, draw near to God, side with God. Resist the devil – resist all that is evil. Do not be of two minds -- pretty much following Christ, more or less, but making room in your life for what is evil and wrong. Clean yourself free of that half-heartedness, that two-mindedness. Try, with God's grace to come to the complete and unassailable faith of Mary, to the radical and all-consuming hope of John the Baptist. Then indeed our parched land will exult and bloom, our blind eyes will be opened, and we will see the glory and splendor that God's way holds out to us.

Oddly enough, Christmas can be a tough time of year to be Christian. There are so many ways to be distracted from what the season is really about, so many ways for us to abandon John's single-mindedness and go swaying to and fro in the wind. There are so many things that can force their way into our mind – those jackals of the first reading -- and divide it, destroy its

unity and peace, so that we cannot join Mary in keeping God's word and cherishing it in our heart.

We might just have to prepare a little desert for ourselves, a few moments of the day maybe, or the first – or last – hour of the night. Make the little journey those people made who went out to see John in the desert by the Jordan.

In all the many tasks of the coming days, make some provision that the most important parts of Mary's life, the most important parts of John's life will live in you: The word of God, the promise of God cherished in your heart and soul.