

Third Sunday of Advent

Year C

Zep 3:14-18a
Is 12:2-3, 4, 5-6
Phil 4:4-7
Lk 3:10-18

John R. Flynn, O.S.A.

This Thursday, December 21 at 7:22pm, EST, the winter solstice occurs. This is the day we have the shortest amount of sunlight and the most amount of darkness for the year. It also marks the beginning of the day to lengthen. In a poetic sense, it marks the conquest of light over darkness, the victory of good over evil, of life over death. It promises that beyond the cold of winter there will be another spring. It invites us to be people of hope, patience, and trust. It invites us to be encouraged in spite of and in the midst of everything that would rob us of hopes, dreams and the faith and the promise that all things are possible with God.

Today's first reading, from the Prophet Zephaniah, is filled with hope and promise. Like all the Old Testament prophets, his book begins with warnings and challenges, with threats and warnings, but by the final verses of book, as we have today, the prophet turns to words that say that God will never abandon God's people, but will be savior, liberator, companion on the journey to healing. Fear not, be not discouraged, Zephaniah announces. The Psalm for today announces: God is savior, I am confident and unafraid, my strength and my courage in the Lord. We are called be encouraged, enheartened, not discouraged and disheartened, again because God is in our midst. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, like most if not all of his letters, written from prison, speaks of joy, of letting go of anxiety, of envisioning a peace that surpasses all our understanding. All of these thoughts are preparing us for the Gospel message, the Good News announcement of John the Baptist, whom we encounter today.

In the search for light, for direction, for answers to the questions that prompt us all to ask: What should we do? What should I do? John offers us clear, practical, possible changes that we can make, to make the promises offered us by God a reality in our lives and in our world. God is coming, but he wants us to make his presence evident through honesty, respect, justice, and compassion, through a change of heart and attitude. We are being asked to have the courage to act so that encouragement fills the hearts of those who are discouraged.

The shift in the seasons and in the sky, is a challenge to us here on earth to enter the struggle between light and darkness in our world, and to be people of light. John the Baptist exhorts us. The truth that the Lord is near, that the Lord is savior and victorious, reminds us that we cannot be discouraged, that we must be people of hope, that we will be the ones who take the initiative to speak encouragement, to work for peace and justice.

So often the message and prayer of this Advent-Christmas season is focused on God working the great miracle that is Jesus. As true and as wonderful as that is, it might lead us to expect that God will again do it all, and we can just wait for God to intervene. John the Baptist tells us that it's not about what God should do, but what we should do to

bring God's plan for the world into the midst of all that we face each day. Can we hear John's challenge surrounded by the promise contained in today's other readings? We can respond to the challenge, knowing that who we yearn for is with us to encourage and strengthen.

On this Thursday evening, take the time to experience the winter solstice, to feel this shift in our planet, to know that there is light and hope that conquers every darkness and doubt. Take the time to pray for the shift that we need in our own hearts. Be an encourager for others. Give thanks that Jesus comes as light and that he asks us to join him in being light for the world.