

III ADVENT 2017

SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

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1 COR 4.1-5 St. MATT. 11.2-10



An exuberant John the Baptist splashes around in a fountain in New York City. “Listen up”, he shouts. “Clear a path for the Lord...remove any obstacles in the way and make the highway straight for our God.”

People respond...a businessman leaves an important meeting...a woman throws away her expensive purse...a taxicab driver abandons his cab...they and many others join John and get dunked in the fountain.

After the people are thoroughly soaked with water they head off in different directions...refreshed and renewed...smiling and dancing...with clearer insight into themselves and stronger love for God...and John sees Jesus looking on from a distance.

The scene described is from the 1973 musical film *Godspell*...an adaptation of the Off-Broadway musical created by John-Michael Tebelak with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. The live performance has seen numerous revivals since...why?

The word *Godspell*...is the Anglo-Saxon word from which we get the word *Gospel*...literally *Good Story*...or *Good News*. John the Baptist’s call for people to repent and start fresh is a timeless message we need to hear...and it isn’t bad news...it’s Good News. In the film...people threw away the things that were getting in their way...the obstacles keeping them from experiencing God’s grace.

John the Baptist is a major character in the Gospel readings for the Third and Fourth Sundays of Advent. About 600 years before John the Baptist was born...Malachi...a prophet whose name means “my messenger”...prophesied God would send a messenger to get people ready for his arrival. John the Baptist is the messenger Malachi was talking about.

It was John’s mission to urge people to stop behaving as if God didn’t matter...as if how they acted toward themselves and others had no consequences...as if dishonesty was acceptable...as if things done in secret would never get found out. John’s message: don’t be dummies...stop this nonsense...turn back to God...while there is still time.

So people responded through a symbolic washing away of sin. But John told the people there was someone greater than he who was coming who would baptize them with water **AND** the Holy Spirit. He would be so great John didn’t think he was good enough to untie his shoes. That someone is Jesus!

When you and I were baptized...we were baptized with water **AND** the Holy Spirit...and it is the Holy Spirit who helps us hear the Good News. More importantly he helps us to listen carefully to John’s message...to pay attention...to respond...and to take action!

The Advent Season is about preparing our hearts and minds for the birth of Jesus. It is a penitential season like Lent...although subdued by elements of joy and hope. And if we are paying attention to John the Baptist’s message...this is a time for doing some spiritual reordering in our lives.

The Advent Wreath reminds us that there are four Sundays in Advent...we hear the prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi about the work John would do to get people ready for Jesus’ arrival...in another prophecy from Isaiah we get a glimpse of what will happen to Jesus on Good Friday...and we hear the Annunciation story from Luke.

If we look at the four candles on the Advent Wreath we see three of them are violet and one is pink (or rose). Today we light the third or rose candle...rose-colored vestments are worn...pink flowers appear at the Altar...today we get a short break in the penitential undertone of Advent.

Today is sometimes called *Gaudete Sunday*...from the Latin word for *Rejoice*...the opening word of the Introit...in which Saint Paul tells us to never stop rejoicing...the Lord is coming soon...that should fill us with great joy and hope.

And John the Baptist’s message is clear...whether we hear it in church...or in the film *Godspell*...or read it for ourselves in Holy Scripture...it is Good News!

“Listen up”, John tells us. “Clear a path for the Lord...remove any obstacles in the way and make the highway straight for our God.”

