

IV Advent 2024

Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish

Father Craig Looney

Philippians 4.4-7 Saint John 1.19-28

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“May you always be joyful in your union with the Lord...I say it again: rejoice! The Lord is coming soon!” Our friend, Saint Paul, encourages us to make joy a central part of our Christian faith, in all circumstances!

Last week we left John the Baptist in the worst possible circumstance. He was in jail for daring to call out Herod Antipas for divorcing his wife and marrying his brother’s ex-wife. John sent some of his own disciples to Jesus to ask him if he was the one or should they be looking for someone else. Jesus told John’s disciples to go back to him and tell him about the miracles they had witnessed for themselves.

Jesus doesn’t appear as a character in this morning’s Gospel. His cousin, John the Baptist, is the main character. Matthew and Mark describe John as a wild-eyed itinerant preacher wearing a camel hair coat and eating locusts and wild honey. He attracted a large crowd with his message of repentance and forgiveness. He asked people to show they were serious about turning their lives around by getting baptized with water.

John also attracted the attention of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. His message the Messiah of Israel was coming made them nervous. They were afraid his preaching and popularity would disrupt the cozy relationship they had with the Roman government. He was a potential troublemaker who could stir up the people and cause the Roman army to take action against them. They decided to send priests and Levites to ask John some questions.

The priests and Levites demanded John tell them who he was. John did not hesitate to say he wasn’t the Messiah. Then they asked him if he was Elijah. Malachi prophesied 500 years earlier Elijah would return to get people ready to receive the Messiah. John answered he wasn’t Elijah either. John never considered himself to be an Elijah figure. We know from what Jesus tells us in Matthew that is exactly the role he filled. John was the one who would come before Jesus to get us ready to receive him.

The priests and Levites were not satisfied with John's answers. They told John they had to report back to those who sent them and asked him again what he had to say about himself. John quoted the prophet Isaiah and answered he was the voice of someone shouting in the desert to make a straight path for the Lord to travel.

Since they weren't getting anywhere with this line of questioning, the priests and Levites asked John to explain why he was baptizing. *Baptism* is not a word used in Judaism, but Jews had been practicing ritual cleansing by immersion in water for several hundred years as a sign of repentance and starting over fresh and renewed. John tells the priests and Levites he is baptizing people with water, but someone even greater than he was coming, and he wasn't even good enough to untie his shoes.

Advent is about us getting ready to welcome Jesus at his First Coming by making a straight path for him to travel, by getting rid of the roadblocks affecting our spiritual lives, and by taking decisive action to start over, fresh and renewed, as people who follow the light of Christ. Our friend Saint Paul gives us some practical advice from his own personal experience how we can do this:

- *Show a gentle attitude toward everyone;*
- *Know the Lord is coming soon;*
- *Don't worry about anything; ask God for what we need;*
- *God's peace is far beyond our understanding; it keeps our hearts and minds safe in union with Jesus Christ;*
- *Put into practice what we have learned.*

The time for us to make a straight path for Jesus to travel directly into our hearts, minds and souls is now, not later.

And we must pay attention to Saint Paul's message in the Epistle, "May you always be joyful in your union with the Lord...I say it again: rejoice! The Lord is coming soon!"

Let us say it again, and again, and again...Rejoice!

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