

Homily for the Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

December 11, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

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First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10 (The signs that will accompany God's redemption.)

Responsory: Psalm 146 (Lord, come and save us.)

Second Reading: James 5:7-10 (Be patient until the coming of the Lord.)

Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11 (Go and tell John what you hear and see.)

There's something very strange about this gospel passage. Matthew's Gospel is the only one that clearly shows John the Baptist recognizing Jesus as the Messiah when he comes to be baptized. In fact, John tells Jesus, "*You should be baptizing me instead.*" Yet, now, several chapters later, Matthew seems to suggest that John has never even met Jesus. From his prison cell, John hears about the amazing works that this person Jesus is doing, and he sends his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" If these different accounts had come from two different authors, then we could speculate that there were conflicting traditions about John and Jesus floating around in the early Church, and each author chose the tradition that made the most sense to him. But, these two stories, which blatantly contradict each other, are from *the same gospel*. What are we to make of this?

Well, we have to understand that Matthew, like all of the other gospel writers, is not just telling the story of *what Jesus did*; he's trying to show *who Jesus is*. And, from Matthew's perspective, Jesus is, first and foremost, the Messiah sent by God *to fulfill the divine plan*. Time and time again, Matthew reminds his readers that Jesus is fulfilling that divine plan by everything that he says and does. Sometimes Matthew inserts his own commentary, saying things like, "Jesus did this in order to fulfill this prophecy," which he then quotes or paraphrases from the Old Testament. In other cases, Jesus himself cites the relevant prophecy, as in today's reading. Jesus tells John's disciples to report what they have heard and seen: "the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." This message is not meant for John, languishing in prison; it's meant for Matthew's readers. He's reminding them of the prophecy from Isaiah that we heard in our first reading today. Jesus is telling *us*, the readers of the Gospel, "These are the signs that were supposed to accompany the coming of the Messiah. I am fulfilling them right before everyone's eyes." So, even though these two stories about John the Baptist and Jesus contradict each other *factually*, they are both proclaiming the *same message*: Jesus is the One who was promised, and he has come to fulfill all that the Prophets wrote about him.

Last Sunday we heard a different prophecy from Isaiah which imagined a world completely transformed – a world where the wolf would be the guest of the lamb, and all of God's creatures would be at peace with one another, because the Christ child was in their midst. That was a symbolic representation of how the coming of the Messiah would bring new life and new hope to the world. The prophecy today imagines a different sort of transformation, where God comes to his people and touches their lives *very directly* and *very personally*, to bring healing and restoration to all who are suffering and longing for a Savior to

redeem them. Today's Gospel proclaims loudly and clearly that Jesus has come to be that Savior and Redeemer. He has come not just to renew the face of the earth, but to renew *every one of God's beloved children* inhabiting the earth.

Notice, also, that when Jesus describes the signs that he is working, he adds two more signs that the Prophet Isaiah did *not* foresee: the *dead are raised*, and the poor have the *good news* proclaimed to them. Jesus clearly is announcing more than a restoration to the "good old days," when Israel was a strong and prosperous nation, enjoying the protection of their God. Rather, he is announcing something entirely *new*, a kingdom in which all, from the least to the greatest, will hear the good news of the Gospel, with its promise of eternal salvation. As Jesus explains, John the Baptist is the last and greatest prophet of the *old covenant*, but he, the Messiah, has come to initiate a *new covenant* between God and his people. Even the least in this new kingdom of heaven will be greater than all those who came before, because none who came before heard the Good News, nor could they enter into eternal life. A new day has dawned with the coming of Christ into the world.

We are blessed to live in that "new day." We give thanks and praise to God for the salvation that Christ has won for us. In fact, our prayer of thanks and praise is at the heart of our celebration at every mass. We call it the Eucharistic Prayer, and it reminds us again and again that we belong to the Kingdom that Jesus and his apostles proclaimed. When our Lord speaks about even the *least* in the kingdom of heaven being so richly blessed, he is speaking about all of us and what he has done for us by coming into the world and offering up his life for us. But, as St. James reminds us today, we still await the *complete* fulfillment of God's divine plan. From the earliest days of the Church, Christians have awaited that day when the Lord would return in glory to bring *all things* to a close. Nearly two thousand years have passed, and we're still waiting.

James urges us to, "be patient until the coming of the Lord." And, imitating Jesus' own style of preaching, he offers a parable from the everyday life of a farmer in first-century Palestine. After the farmer plants his crops, he has to wait patiently for the rains to fall and the fruits of the earth to emerge. He cannot control when the rains will come or how quickly the crops will grow. He simply goes about his business, cooperating with the natural processes that God has decreed, and waits patiently for the hoped-for results.

That is a wonderful metaphor for the Christian life. We have to trust that there *is* a divine plan directing all of Creation to a particular conclusion, just as there is an order of nature which directs the cycles of weather and the growing of crops. These things are known to us, to some extent, though many of the details remain hidden from our sight and our understanding. The key, both for the farmer and the faithful Christian, is *patience*. As we trust that the forces of nature are causing the crops to grow underground, we also trust that Christ is active in the world, touching hearts and moving God's plan toward its fulfillment. We all hope to play a constructive role, but we must leave the *timing* and the *end result* in God's hands.