

"Advent" is a term that comes from the preparation for a homecoming. A king sends his army out to fight the enemy and several years later they return victorious! In the advent the city prepares a celebration, to honor those who fought, and secured their protection.

During the Advent Season, we prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts and honor Him for securing OUR spiritual protection through his death and resurrection. Our pink, or "rose" vestments, as Fr Howard would say, celebrate "Gaudete" Sunday, a Latin word for "Rejoice!"

Today's readings help us explore the reason for our rejoicing. The book of Isaiah describes the redemption of Israel with the words, "Here is your God, he comes with vindication; he comes to save you." This is followed by a prophecy to help discern this divine coming, "The eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf are cleared." Then, for hundreds of years, the Jews wait for their salvation as they are dominated by their enemies, including the Roman Empire.

Then, John the Baptist arrives, also to fulfill a prophecy from a few chapters later in Isaiah, "A voice proclaims in the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD!" In today's gospel John is in prison and sends his followers to ask Jesus if He IS the Messiah. Jesus could have just said "Yes," but instead he asks them to discern for themselves.

Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, ... the deaf hear." Theologian John Shea says, "Each person must come to their own conclusion about whether Jesus is the one for whom they are waiting." Jesus doesn't just claim the title of "Messiah," he puts the ball in our court and offers himself to be our savior.

We have to ask ourselves, "Is Jesus MY savior?" Is my heart filled with joy on this Gaudete Sunday, thanking Jesus for fighting my battles against evil and guiding me on his path to heaven?

The next part of the gospel leads us through a reflection of our spiritual journey. It reads a little like Jesus asking Peter repeatedly, "Do you love me?"

Jesus says, "What did you go out to the desert to see?" Again, in the words of John Shea, "Jesus probes their hearts by asking [the crowds] why they were attracted to John. When they went into the desert of self-examination ... what were they looking for? This question, which will be repeated three times, is the strategy of a spiritual teacher trying to uncover the deepest desires of the [disciples] hearts." It's these deep desires that match like a puzzle piece to our personal savior, Jesus, who stands by to deliver us.

Jesus asks if they went to see, "A reed swayed by the wind?" In our modern day, this is what Pope Benedict called, "relativism," the notion that truth and morality are not absolute and sway in the wind, subject to each person's viewpoint.

Next, he asks if they went to see, "Someone dressed in fine clothing?" Since John's clothes were made of a camel's hair, this refers to people seeking something else, the wisdom of the wealthy and the glitz of celebrities.

Finally, Jesus says, "Then why did you go out? To see a prophet?" And He answers his own question, "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." Then Jesus confirms that John IS the prophet who Isaiah said would proceed him.

This leads us to the question for each of us, why did we leave the comfort of our homes today and why do we keep coming to mass? Advent is the time to ponder this question.

I had two profound experiences of God as a child. The first occurred in front of my house in Mission Viejo on a clear night with a full moon. I was alone, but I felt a presence that was unmistakable. Though no words were spoken, I knew, for that short moment, I was in the presence of God.

My second experience of God occurred one evening as I was passing my parent's bedroom and saw my father alone, kneeling at his bedside, silently praying. The sum of these experiences as a ten-year-old, was 1) God the Father was real and 2) my human father also believed in Him.

Fast-forward 50 years and my father, in his late 80s, spends three weeks in a hospital/rehab after a fall. In the ER we waited together for hours until he was admitted to the hospital, and I offered to pray with him. It was a time of physical and emotional suffering filled with uncertainty. But in our prayer, it was filled with God's presence.

Each day, we prayed together for his healing, for my Mom, and for all our family members who were helping to support them. If I forgot to pray, my Dad would reach out his hands and remind me. I knew that the hand of God was keeping my father, the patient, calm and peaceful during this challenging time, and 2 weeks ago, he had healed enough to come home.

This is what our savior does when we accept his offer to be our Messiah. He takes us by the hand, leads us through the valley of darkness, lightens our load, and illuminates our path. We all have these memories of God in our lives, but we don't always reflect on them. Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." We too need to recall our divine experiences, share our stories of God's presence with others, and give the gift of hope in Christ, our savior.

I'll close with Saint Anselm, a bishop, Benedictine monk, and theologian from the 11th century. His advice is germane, as we discern our deepest desire, and prepare ourselves to receive our savior this Christmas. He begins...

"Insignificant man, escape from your everyday business for a short while, hide for a moment from your restless thoughts. Break off from your cares and troubles and be less concerned about your tasks and labors. Make a little time for God and rest a while in Him.

Enter into your mind's inner chamber. When you have shut the door, look for him. Speak now to God and say with your whole heart: I seek your face; your face, Lord, I desire.

Teach me to seek you, and when I seek you show yourself to me, for I cannot seek you unless you teach me, nor can I find you unless you show yourself to me. Let me seek you in desiring you, desire you in seeking you, and find you in loving you." Amen.