

Second Sunday of Advent, B – December 10, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 725 words
Adapted from a homily by Fr. Geoff Horton, Diocese of Peoria

When we read about John the Baptist, it's easy to focus on things like his radicalness, the way he dressed and ate, and the black-and-whiteness of his message. But I wonder if we really appreciate the importance of his role. Though he only makes a few brief appearances in the gospels before his beheading at King Herod's command, yet he was important enough that just 25 years after the first Easter, St. Paul found disciples of his all the way up in Greece! He was important enough that all four gospels point to him as the one who pointed the way to Christ.

What made John special? He was the last and greatest of the prophets. For centuries, God spoke to his people through prophets. If a person wanted to know God's will in a matter, he would often seek out a prophet to learn it. As Israel became a great kingdom, the prophets were there. As Israel became divided against itself, the prophets were there. As Israel was exiled into Babylon, the prophets were there. And when they returned home, the prophets were there. That said, the prophets were not always liked or appreciated; in fact, many of them were killed.

Well suddenly, around the year 450BC, God stopped sending prophets. And unwelcome though they sometimes had been, the silence of God was worse. When Jewish armies recaptured their desecrated Temple in 164BC, they did not know how to go about re-consecrating the altar – they had not preserved the memory of all of their religious rituals – and so they had to make another and wait for a prophet to tell them what to do with the pieces of the old, desecrated altar. As far as we know, their question was never answered.

But then came John the Baptist, sometime around the year AD30. Suddenly there was a voice from God again. His message was not easy – repentance from sin never is – but the gospels relate that people came from all over to hear him, even from the big city of Jerusalem. It didn't matter that the message was hard! Finally, at last, God was speaking to his people again!

And what was he saying? "Get ready, for the promised deliverer is coming." This is what Isaiah said symbolically in the first reading: Clear all obstacles in his path; make his way flat and smooth and straight. Then proclaim the Good News from the mountaintops: "God is coming! The time of suffering and punishment is over! He is going to make everything right again!"

St. John the Baptist thus announced that the deliverer truly had come: Jesus Christ, the savior of the world. But he came, and lived, and suffered, and died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven... and we are still here in world that still suffers. When will he set things right in a definitive way? Why is the Lord so slow in coming?

In our second reading today, St. Peter was writing to people who were asking themselves that very question. But God is not slow; he is patient. He wants to give everyone the time they need to repent and follow him. For some it takes longer than others. Thus St. Peter tells us our task: "Conduct yourselves in holiness and devotion," he says, "waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God; be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace."

Advent is the season of patient waiting – not spiritual slumber! It is the time for being eager to be found ready for Christ's return. I again wish to invite those who have not been to confession regularly, or even for a very long time, to return to this important sacrament. The Lord will come at a time we do not expect! We will not be able to claim ignorance about the time of his coming, for he has told us so many times that we must be ready.

Our wait continues. After the Jewish people had been without a prophet for 450 years, we can imagine what a surprise John the Baptist's arrival was. We can be patient with the Lord during our wait, for he has been so patient with us! He has promised, and he will keep his promise – let us indeed be patient; but let us also be ready!