

Third Sunday of Advent, Cycle B

Isaiah 60:1-2a, 10-11; Luke 1:46-50, 53-54 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

James Martin, SJ has a funny line a spiritual director told him, "There is a Messiah and it's not you." He credits this "dope slap" with clearing a lot of pride that blocked his spiritual growth. Our Advent journey also needs a healthy dose of humility. This Sunday we encounter three deeply humble people, John the Baptist, Isaiah and Mary, and see the impact of humility on them and, consequently, on all humanity.

When the Jews inquire of John the Baptist, "Who are you?" John could have bragged, because he was an influencer. He had a brand – uncut hair, camel hair garment and a funky diet – and a message that resonated with people. Many made the trip to see him, listened to his teaching and chose to be baptized. This ritual cleansing was a statement that they wanted to be humble and repent. So John could have exaggerated his significance and claimed to be the one who actually did the saving. We all have dabbled in this pool – maybe dived head first into it – by insisting our way is the only way, the best way. While our ideas or views are sometimes very right, very needed or very essential, we also have bad or mistaken ideas and views. Our gifts have limitations and the gifts of others are also vehicles for God's work. The shiny appeal of being important in the eyes of others is a trap.

John the Baptist could have also taken on lesser celebrity: Elijah, who would begin the Messianic age, or the Prophet Moses promised would be a new liaison between the Israelites and God. While not starring roles, they could earn John the Baptist an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. This is another spiritual trap, the false humility of not claiming the spotlight, but still feeling essential.

John is passionate about who he is not. In contrast to the seven "I am" statements Jesus would make to declare his divinity, John *confesses*, "I am not the Christ." This confession was pivotal in determining who John could be, "the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" He could point others toward Jesus, who, it turned out, was not just the Messiah as the Jews had framed the title, a new political and/or spiritual human leader, but the Word of God, who was God (John 1:1).¹ John's own humility cleared the way for God to do awesome deeds in the world. Likewise, we need humility; we need to shed all sense of messiahship in ourselves, clearing the way for God to act.

Humility does not mean inactivity. Rather, Isaiah 61 indicates that humility involves actively carrying out God's will for the world. This will is that those who have been humiliated be raised up, regain freedoms and have lost property restored. Yes, to help others in this way is not glamorous nor does it generate worldly success. Yet this is the will of God. We must not shy away from it or dismiss it as part of some socialist agenda. "God has sent *me* to be bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord." (The year of favor meant a re-leveling of the socio-economic playing field.) God uses mercy to create humility in us and humility in turn acts with mercy.

If the pandemic seems to limit your ability to be God's instrument of mercy, get creative! Reach out every day to at least one person who is lonely or struggling. See if you can deliver food to the homes of the hungry so that the sight of their home can connect you to them. Stop buying stuff for yourself, your family and friends, unless it is truly needed, and buy essentials for the poor. Give something to the homeless person on the street and don't worry about what they do with the money; access to services for the homeless has been cut back due to the quarantine. Write Christmas cards and pray for each person as you seal the envelope. Call a shelter or a hospital and find out what they need help with.

If we do these or other merciful acts, we will be filled with joy, as the poet writes in Isaiah and Mary proclaims in the responsorial psalm. Humility empties us so that God can fill us with joy. Who doesn't want joy this Christmas?

- ❖ When do you fall into the trap of thinking you are the messiah?
- ❖ What are you doing to bring mercy to others this Advent?

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¹ Moloney, Francis J., "John," *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*. Paulist Press, 2018, p. 1120.