

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

December 15, 2019 A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of our Lord Jesus Christ, creation rejoices in the hope of the Savior's coming and looks forward with longing to his return at the end of time. Prepare our hearts for our Lord's coming and remove all the things that hinder us from feeling the joy and hope which his presence will bestow. Be with us now, Lord, as we gather to share our lives and your holy Word. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator: In the first reading, Isaiah offers hope to the weak and frightened Israelites living in exile. In the second reading, James also offers hope to people awaiting the Second Coming of the Lord. In the Gospel, the imprisoned John the Baptist is confused about the identity of Jesus.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the first reading, the psalm and the second reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

The people of Israel are in exile because of their infidelity to their covenant with God. But God's prophet announces the good news that their time of exile is about to end. God is coming to *liberate* his broken-hearted people.

Just as Moses led their ancestors through the desert to the Promised Land, God will lead his people through the desert and back to the Promised Land. But this journey through the desert will not be rigorous and difficult like their first journey. Their way will be eased by the gracious hand of God. Nature will be transformed. Oases will spring up to refresh them and where once brambles and thorns had made travel difficult, now flowers and beautiful foliage will decorate their path. During their journey, the frightened will become bold, the feeble will gain strength, and the blind, the lame, and the deaf will experience liberation.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 146

This psalm expresses God's concern for the disenfranchised and poor.

SECOND READING: James 5:7-10

James counsels the Christian community to practice patience. (People are becoming impatient because Jesus' return or Second Coming is being delayed and

because of conflicts in the community.) James uses the image of a farmer to make his point. Just as a farmer is subject to the elements of nature and must cooperate with them, so must the Christian practice patience with God's timing and ways. James also urges his readers to take as models the prophets who suffered much as they spoke the Word of God.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 11:2-11

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 11:2-11

Last week, we encountered John out in the desert; today, we meet him in prison (which must have been an awful experience for a man who loves the wilderness). He is in jail because he told Herod that it is wrong for him to marry his brother's wife.

The Gospel has two parts: the first speaks about John's faith crisis, and the second about his role in the plan of salvation, as established by Jesus.

It would seem that John's followers have been reporting to him about the ministry of Jesus: his healings and his befriending of sinners. John is confused because Jesus is not turning out to be the type of messiah that he foretold. John, it seems, is looking for one who possesses a more forceful and authoritative expression of power. Where are the axe, winnowing fan and fire spoken about in last Sunday's Gospel? John wonders if Jesus is the One who is to come—or should he look for another? Jesus' response is indirect. Contrary to popular expectations, Jesus will neither be the militaristic leader who would drive out the Romans nor the 'hell-fire and damnation' messiah. Rather, Jesus is to fulfill the vision of the Messiah described by Isaiah in today's first reading: he will bring healing to the sick and mercy to sinners.

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Fr. George Smiga writes:

"In Matthew's story, John represents those of us who find ourselves at a point in life when it becomes clear that the vision to which we gave our lives is not emerging."

John's image of the Messiah is of a stern judge executing fiery judgement on sinners. When John hears of Jesus' attitude towards sinners, especially his eating with sinners, he begins to wonder if Jesus is really the long-awaited Messiah. He wonders if he should look elsewhere. This was a huge faith crisis for John.

Jesus seeks to dispel John's doubts by showing that he is doing the very things that the prophets said the Messiah would do, namely, restore sight to the blind, make the deaf hear, raise the dead, etc. (See today's first reading.)

Then Jesus says: *"Blest are the ones who take no offense at me"* (not scandalized). These words are intended to challenge John and his followers to correct their perception of the Messiah and to accept God's way of saving the world.

Jesus goes on to say that John is a super special guy precisely because he is the one chosen by God to prepare people's hearts to receive Jesus. Yet despite his great role in the history of salvation, "the least in the kingdom of God is greater than him." How come, we may ask? Because John does not live to see and experience the New Age that Jesus comes to inaugurate, like, for example, the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit that takes place at Pentecost.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what word/s or image/s in the readings caught your attention? Did they comfort or challenge you or touch you in some way?

The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.

2. The first reading speaks about 'frightened hearts.' At times, all of us feel scared and fragile. What can cause you to be fearful? What helps you deal with your fears?

3. James speaks about 'patient waiting.' Can you recall a time when you had to patiently wait for God or something else? How did you cope with that? Are you a patient person? What in us might cause us to be impatient?

4. John was confused about Jesus' identity because of his miracles and works of mercy. Is there anything about God's ways that confuses you?

5. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: If you know someone for whom this is an anxious or frightening time, contact them to let them know you are praying for them. Practice patience when tempted to be impatient.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *"Good and patient God, help me to be patient with my own shortcomings. Help me to be patient with you and others."*

**CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING,
PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Facilitator: Let us now conclude with prayers of thanksgiving, petition and intercession. What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Father in heaven,
our hearts desire the warmth of your love
and our minds are searching for the light
of your Word.*

*Increase our longing for Christ our Savior
and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming
may find us rejoicing in his presence
and welcoming the light of his truth.*

*We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.
Amen.*

**SCC Annual Day of Reflection: We Are Mission!
January 25, 2020, 8:00am – 3:00pm
Presented by
Fr. Blake Britton & Dr. Carol Razza
St. John the Evangelist Parish, Viera, FL
Info and \$12 Tickets at sccspacecoast@gmail.com**