

Third Sunday of Advent, Year A  
Is 35:1-6a, 10  
Ps 146: 6-10  
James 5:7-10  
Mt 11:2-11

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A website told me that here in Glen Ellyn, at our precise geographic coordinates, this morning's sunrise occurred at 7:13 and that the sun will set this afternoon at 4:22, making for a day that is 9 hours, 9 minutes long. Not long at all. The one good thing, I suppose, is that the long nights give us ample opportunity to enjoy the Christmas lights, which are delightful.

Think back to our prehistoric ancestors, our cave-dwelling ancestors. They had a keen eye for the patterns of the natural world. They observed how the sun, as it passes from east to west, rises and falls along a north-south axis. In the summer the sun reaches high to the north; in the winter it plunges south. As each day it would sink lower and lower in the southern sky, cutting ever shorter and shorter swaths on its east-west journey, they must have been uneasy about the prospect that one year it was going to sink all the way down. The sun gives us light and heat and energy. What would we do without it? But every year it stops sinking. It seems to stand still. (Latin-speaking people called it *solstitium* – the sun standing still – from which we get our word solstice.) Then it turns around and starts rising again. And that's time for a party. The ancient world, including the Greco-Roman world, celebrated the winter solstice, and eventually the Church adopted those wintertime festivities as the occasion to celebrate the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The feast of the unconquered sun (S-U-N) became the feast of the Unconquered Son (S-O-N).

Isaiah is the prophet of Advent. Isaiah gives us image after image of how God will save his people, image after image of the fulfillment that will come in the Kingdom of God. In today's reading Isaiah proclaims that in the time of fulfillment the feeble will grow strong; the blind, the deaf, the mute, and the lame will all be cured. And that's the evidence Jesus points to in today's Gospel, when he answers the question John the Baptist's disciples brought him. "Are you the *Christos*, the anointed one of God? Are you the Messiah who will set God's people free?" "Look," Jesus says, "the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, and the poor share in the good news."

"But," Jesus goes on to say, "don't think I have come to take up where King David and King Solomon left off. That's not the kind of Messiah I am. If that's what people expect, they will be disappointed." "Blessed is the one who takes no offense in me." The Greek word that "takes no offense" tries to translate is a verb based on the word *skandalon*,

which means stumbling block. Don't trip yourself up, Jesus is saying. If we are going to follow him, we must give up our expectations and accept him on his terms, as he is.

One of the threads woven through our Advent liturgies is the theme of light and darkness. One of those images comes from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone." As much as the Jewish people of Isaiah's time, we are the people in darkness. We have seen the great light, the great light has shined upon us, and we have, so often and in so many ways, turned away from the light. The prevailing culture, our culture, loves the Christmas lights but ignores the true light. We love our darkness and in our delusion we call it light.

Pope St. John Paul II, prophetically, called our culture the culture of death. In the culture of death we solve problems by killing. Warfare, terrorism, abortion, capital punishment, murder – they are all ways of solving problems. We see it reflected over and over in the movies and tv programs we entertain ourselves with. We kill for the sake of convenience and expediency and then tell each other it had to be done. We kill bodies. We kill spirits. We deaden our own souls because, we say, it had to be done.

The world without Jesus is a dark and dreary and dangerous and lonely place. Against the culture of death Jesus proclaims the Gospel of Life. Jesus came, he said, to give us life – life to the full. The fullness of life Jesus gives stands in stark contrast to the culture of death.

Advent is the time when we prepare to celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation. God the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity entered into human history and human culture. The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. We live in the new age, straddling both the already and the not-yet, living in the joyful hope of a promised future fulfillment. Jesus honors John the Baptist in today's Gospel as a prophet, as the best the old world had to offer. But everyone in this new age, everyone who embraces the Gospel of Life, is worthy of even greater honor. Last week we heard John the Baptist tell us that his baptism was for the sake of repentance; it's a baptism of nothing but water. Jesus's baptism, though, John tells us, is of more than water; in Jesus's name the Church baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The fire of the Holy Spirit gives heat and energy and light and life.

The people in darkness have seen a great light. On those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone.