

Third Sunday of Advent: December 17, 2006

“One mightier than I is coming.”

How should we interpret John the Baptist’s use of the word “mighty?” Would the Christ to come be even more fierce, more ascetical, more wild and crazy than the great prophet who lived in the desert and ate locusts for dinner? Would he truly be mightier than John the Baptist?”

As a young boy given the name “John,” I found myself choosing John the gentle Evangelist as my patron saint rather than John the Baptist, that fierce, mighty prophet of the desert. Even back then I suppose there was something in me drawn to images of God the *Lover*, rather than images of God the fearful judge. The readings we begin to hear during this third week of Advent challenge us to reshape our images of God, to rethink the meaning of the word “mighty.”

Today we begin to hear less about the fearful mighty judge of the end times and more about the little baby born in Bethlehem who is destined to die on a cross. Even John the Baptist probably has to reconsider the meaning of the word “mighty” once he sees Jesus beginning his public ministry. After all, Jesus’ style is much different than that of John the Baptist. John lives out in the desert, wears animal skins, and eats locusts. Jesus wanders through the villages, dances at wedding feasts, and dines with sinners and tax collectors. Did you ever think that Jesus’ behavior and style of ministry might have thrown even John the Baptist for a loop? This “mighty one to come” is even accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because of his tendency to hang around with the very people John the Baptist so fiercely calls to repentance.

I admit that there are a few instances in the Gospels where Jesus appears to be a harsh and mighty judge in the style of John. Jesus certainly is *not* a doormat. He is *not* passive in his pacifism. But the *predominant* image of Jesus presented by the Gospel writers is the forgiving, non-violent, joyful Christ of the resurrection stories and parables like the Prodigal Son, and the Good Shepherd.

Jesus redefines for us the word “mighty.” He tells us over and over again to “be not afraid.” He surprises us by coming into the world as a helpless baby, and dying on the cross like a common criminal. His life forces us to reconsider what it means to be “mighty.” His life compels us to reshape our fearful images of God.

The scriptures of the 3rd and 4th week of Advent help us to do some of this reshaping. For example, I like to think that Jesus, the mighty one, grew up praying often with the passage we heard today from the prophet Zephaniah, especially when he says: “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a *mighty savior*; he will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will *sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.*” This joyful image of God is too often overlooked in our tradition. According to Zephaniah, the “mighty savior” will “sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.”

Have you ever stopped to hear God singing joyfully because of you? Can you imagine what God’s voice might sound like as he joyfully sings *your* song? Is it high pitched or low? Male or

female? Is it operatic, or does it have a country western twang? Does God sing for you in Spanish, or French, or maybe even Latin? Do you hear the strumming of a guitar or the blast of a mighty organ? I like to think that God has a song for each of us . . . a *love song* that speaks to us of God's great longing and desire to be with us, God's longing to embrace us and dispel all our fears. God longs to be with us with all the anticipation of a child longing for Christmas morning.

Fr. Bob likes to make the point that the original Hebrew word for "sing" in the passage from Zephaniah can also be translated as "dance." So, we can say that our God wants to dance joyfully because of us, as one dances at festivals. Anyone who has had the opportunity to see *A Dancer's Christmas* this Advent Season might have a better sense of this rejoicing God who longs to dance with us.

Can we be challenged this Advent Season to stop for a moment to imagine Jesus singing and dancing for us, with us? Can we accept the challenge to reconsider what it means that Jesus is mightier than John? Can we ask for the grace this Advent to reshape our fearful images of *God's might* into images of *God's mighty love*?

We can rejoice on this third Sunday of Advent because we know that our mighty God first rejoices in us. I think even John the Baptist would agree that *this* truly is the Good News.