

**Sunday, December 15, 2019**  
**Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)**  
Isaiah 35.1-10; James 5.7-10; Matthew 11.2-11  
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**“Actions Speak Louder Than Words”**

The season of Advent is about anticipating and preparing for the coming of Jesus, both at his birth in Bethlehem and at some unknown date in the future, at what we refer to as the Second Coming. And while this season is focused on the coming of Jesus, the “icon” for this season is most certainly John the Baptist, who epitomizes what it means to “prepare the way of the Lord.” In fact, John is featured on two of the four Sundays of Advent; and in two of the three years of our lectionary cycle, he even is featured in utero on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, leaping for joy in his mother’s womb at the arrival of Mary who is pregnant with Jesus.

In the Gospel readings for the Second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist is always presented as the one who prepares the way of the Lord. And on the Third Sunday of Advent, John continues this by emphatically declaring that he is not the Messiah, the one who is to come, but one more powerful than he is coming after him. Except for this year, Year A of our lectionary cycle. While John does play a crucial role in the Gospel for this Third Sunday of Advent, he does not even make an appearance. He is only referenced as asking a question regarding Jesus. A question that is conveyed through messengers: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Mt 11.3). It sounds as if John is not so sure if Jesus is really the Messiah. Odd, given John’s role as the one who prepares the way of the Lord. Doesn’t sound like he is quite sure who the Lord actually is.

Now to be clear, while we talk about John the Baptist pointing to Jesus as Messiah, the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—never have John specifically stating that Jesus is the Messiah. Only in the Gospel According to John does John the Baptist say, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me’” (Jn 1.29-30). But then again, the Gospel According to John is a whole other kettle of fish.

So maybe it isn’t so odd that John the Baptist, the one who we know to point the way to the Messiah, actually asks the question, “Are you the one?” After all, he obviously had a pretty good idea if he sent messengers to ask that question of Jesus. If anything, he was seeking to do his due diligence. He wants to be sure before he sends his own disciples to follow Jesus.

So, is Jesus the one who is to come? Rather than simply saying, “Of course I’m the Messiah,” Jesus replies, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me” (Mt 11.4-6). In this response, Jesus is not just reciting his resume—telling John what he has accomplished to somehow convince him he is the Messiah. Jesus is calling to mind the ancient prophecies of Isaiah about what the kingdom of God will be like. Calling to mind what the Messiah will do for

God's people. We hear a bit of this prophecy in today's Old Testament reading: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy" (Is 35.5-6a). And other such images of what the Messiah will do are sprinkled throughout other parts of Isaiah's prophecies.

Essentially, Jesus is asking his hearers to recall what God has promised for his people, what the Messiah will do. And to decide for themselves if what Jesus is doing—the healing of the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf; the raising of the dead; the proclaiming of the good news of the coming of God's kingdom—is in keeping with what God has promised.

What was behind Jesus' response was the establishment of his authenticity as the Messiah. This was a time when the people were so hungry for the coming of the Messiah to liberate them from the oppressive Roman Empire, they were seeing would-be messiahs around every corner. People were coming out of the woodwork claiming to be the Messiah. Some may have believed that they themselves were the Messiah, but undoubtedly many were mere con artists. So yeah, it would have been easy for Jesus to say, "Of course I'm the Messiah." But he knew that for people to really believe that he was the Messiah, his actions would speak louder than his words.

As those who follow Christ, we look to him as the model for our lives. And today's interaction between Jesus and John's messengers is of vital importance as we live our own lives of faith. To always remember that actions speak louder than words. Or, as popularly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the Gospel at all times. And if necessary, use words." While there is no evidence Francis actually did say those words, the sentiment is clear. The Gospel is most appropriately expressed not in our words, but in our actions. There is no denying that proclaiming of the Gospel in words is important and does have its place. But what is truly important is how the Gospel gets translated into everyday life. How the Gospel is put into action in everyday life. That our actions are what truly speak to who we are and what our priorities are.

While there are times when it is important to proclaim the Gospel with our words, to proclaim the teachings of Christ when and where appropriate, there are times when words do little good.

It's easy to say that it is a tragedy that we have so many homeless people on our streets. That we care for the homeless. But that is little comfort and does nothing for those who are homeless. Preaching to them does not help their immediate need. Telling them that God loves them does not help their immediate need. What they really need is shelter. The way we can truly demonstrate our care for them, the way we can truly demonstrate God's concern and care for them, is to help them find shelter.

It's easy to say that it is criminal that there are so many hungry people here in the richest nation on earth. To say we sympathize with the person who is hungry, even though most of us have never truly hungered. After all, it's easy for us to go to the fridge or the pantry and get something to eat if we are hungry. But the person who truly hungers does not have that luxury. What they need is not our sympathy or mere platitudes, but for someone to demonstrate their

care and concern for them by helping them obtain the food they need to survive. Providing food is a tangible sign that we care for them. Even more so, it is a tangible sign that God cares for them.

We could go on and on with all the various categories of the marginalized that Jesus lays out. The ones who were marginalized that Jesus did not preach to, but who Jesus actually helped throughout his ministry. Healing the sick, visiting the prisoner, caring for the widow and orphan. Our words are not enough. If we are truly followers of Christ, we will do more than just say that these people need certain things. We will work to provide those things. We will not just try to soothe them by telling them that God loves them. We will show them that God loves them in tangible ways.

Another way to look at this is that in putting the Gospel into action, we are showing God's hospitality for his beloved children. St. Gregory's is a place that has a long history of hospitality and being welcoming. It's one thing to say we are welcoming. It's another to actually demonstrate that we are welcoming. And we do a pretty good job of providing hospitality, of welcoming those in our midst. But how does our hospitality extend beyond our walls? That's where the outreach ministries of our congregation are incredibly important to those who are truly in need of hospitality. Of having a meal, of having shelter, of being cared for in any number of ways. We can't expect those people to come to us. We need to take the Gospel out into the world and to share the message of God's love with those of particular concern to God. To share that love not just with our words, but in our actions.

There again, we do a pretty good job of that. Through our Feed My Lambs program we provide food and items of comfort to the homeless of Long Beach. Through our food bank we provide food for those who may not have enough. We collect Christmas gifts for those who would otherwise not be able to provide gifts for their families. We provide school supplies for underprivileged children so that they have the basic supplies they otherwise would not have to help in their education. And so many other projects throughout the year. It's all these little things we do that make a difference in people's lives. That send a message that we care. But more importantly, that God cares. Because as the people of God, we are his hands and feet in the world. And by providing those tangible things, we are sending the message that "yes, God does love you. God cares about you. When you hurt, God hurts. And just as God wants to alleviate your hurt and meet your needs, we as God's people want to do what we can to alleviate your hurt and meet your needs."

Another way we show hospitality is that we are blessed with wonderful facilities that we willingly open to others by providing space for groups that need a place to meet. Groups that are making a difference in people's lives. Like the Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon groups that need a safe place to work on their own healing. Like the Red Cross which holds CPR training classes here so others have the skills they need to help those in distress and even to save lives. And a variety of other organizations who need a place to gather so that they too can work to make a difference in the community.

The season of Advent is primarily about Christ coming into our midst at Christmas, through his birth 2,000 years ago. About Christ coming into our midst at some future point in time at the

end of the ages. But we live in that time in between. And so Advent, being about the past and the future, also spans the present. And that Christ does indeed come in the present. Not that Christ himself comes in bodily form. Well, that's not entirely true. We are the Body of Christ. And we who are the Body of Christ go out into the world and demonstrate the presence of Christ in the world even now through how we seek to proclaim the Gospel not only in word, but most particularly in action.

There is so much need in this broken and hurting world. As the Body of Christ—as Advent people—we have the opportunity to demonstrate God's love, to shine Christ's light in the world. To stand with Jesus and say to anyone who asks where Christ is in the world: "Tell of what you see and what you hear being done in his name. There you will find the Messiah."