

With the Winter Solstice on Thursday of this week we will reach the point of the greatest hours of daily darkness here in the northern hemisphere. While nature marches toward the day of greatest darkness, our Advent liturgies become “brighter”. On this Third Sunday, known as “Gaudete” (Rejoicing) Sunday, the symbol of light takes center stage from the increased light on the Advent wreath, to the Scripture readings pointing us toward the dawn of God’s light rising upon the earth in the birth of Jesus.

Again our guide is John the Baptist. Today John is not the fiery preacher we find in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke whom we encountered last Sunday. Rather, as the opening lines of today’s Gospel selection from John state, John the Baptist comes for testimony, to give witness. John the evangelist states very directly, John “was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone was coming into the world” (Jn. 1:8,9.)

As we journey naturally into this darkest time of the year we too are invited to give testimony that the darkness around us will not have the last word. The light displays we erect at this time of year can serve as our testimony that not only the natural darkness will not overcome us, but that we choose to be “points of light”, we too like John, commit to giving “testimony” to the light of God revealed in Jesus, the Light of the World, who comes anew in the Holy Spirit taking flesh in us in the midst of so much darkness physically, politically, morally and spiritually.

Light in its nature, exists not for itself, but for others. Light’s mission is to provide a means so that anyone who comes to it may find their way by means of it through the darkness. Light as a product of fire also possesses the capacity to dispel the cold and bring the comfort of warmth to all who bask in its aura.

Isaiah in today’s first reading illustrates just what light is and what giving testimony to the light entails. The prophet speaks of the good news that is to be proclaimed to the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives the prisoners—the year of Jubilee, the year of God’s favor, when God will be vindicated and those who mourn will receive a crown instead of

ashes. The original context of the prophet's message was Israel's returning to their homeland and rebuilding their lives as a nation after experiencing the darkness of the fall of their nation and captivity in Babylon. In St. Luke's Gospel (Lk. 4:14-21) Jesus quotes this passage as he reveals himself and his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry. His mission is inaugurate the time of God's Kingdom, God's favor, God's mercy, a time of healing, reconciliation, peace. Personally, this passage has great meaning for me as it was the first reading I chose for the Mass of my priestly ordination and has, and continues, to guide my priestly ministry.

Through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and each celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the message and mission of Isaiah are renewed in our presence. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit each of us is called, like John the Baptist, to give "testimony to the light" to be, as a candidate for President of the United States stated some twenty or so years ago, "a point of light."

Like John the Baptist, like light itself, we are not to focus on ourselves, exalt in our accomplishments. Like light our mission is to point the way for others, to bring warmth into the coldness of their lives. As a parish your generosity in this weekend's annual appeal for the retirement needs of religious order priests, brothers and sisters as well as your generosity to the monthly Black Bag Collection, and the special appeals that you've responded to are, for me, a humbling example of your commitment to be "light" in the midst of darkness. Stephen Ministry, Military Outreach Ministry, Homebound Holy Communion Ministry, Bereavement Ministry, volunteers who work at "Food at First", ERP, Habitat for Humanity, and so many more ways unseen and private give flesh and blood to the words of Isaiah, are means of "testifying to the light", the dawn of the re-birth of Jesus among us. They are powerful, Spirit filled, witness that we will not allow the darkness to overcome us.

As we approach the darkest day of the year, we boldly proclaim, "The Lord is my light and my salvation." (Ps. 27)

Fr. Jim Secora