

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, Year B
Is 61:1-2,10-11; Lk 1:46-50,53-54; 1 Thes 5:16-24; Jn 1:6-8,19-28

***A JOYFUL VERDICT:
THE CHILD TO BE BORN IS THE MESSIAH***

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun
Saturday, December 10, 2011
8:00 p.m. Mass, Marriott Hotel, Detroit, MI

Whether we are **joyful** or not,
the **Church wants us to be joyful**.

There is too much gloom and doom, darkness and sadness, in our world.

If the world only **knew Jesus**, born in Bethlehem on the first Christmas,
the **world** would have **more joy**,
and **we** would have **more joy**.

Accept Jesus, and **joy** is sure to follow.
Serve Jesus, and **joy** is sure to follow.

The Mass sets up the gospel with prayers and readings
that state and re-state the **JOY theme** over and over again.

Please listen for the words “joy” or “rejoice.”

The entrance antiphon is:
“**Rejoice** in the Lord always; again I say, **rejoice**” (Phil 4:4-5).
That is **twice** for **joy** already as the Mass begins.

Then in the Collect, the Opening Prayer, we hear:
“Enable us to attain the **joys** of so great a salvation,”
and, “celebrate with glad **rejoicing**.”
This is **twice more** for **joy**, **four** and counting.

In the first reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah we hear:
“**Glad tidings**” [joyful news] (Is 61:1);
“I **rejoice** heartily in the Lord” (Is 61:10a),
“In my God is the **joy** of my soul” (Is 61:10a).
This is **three more** “joys,” **seven** and counting.

Then in the Responsorial Psalm, the first verse is:
“My spirit finds **joy** in God my Savior” (Lk 1:47).
The refrain is: “My soul **rejoices** in my God” (Lk 1:47),
and it is repeated four times.

Joy is found **once** in the **verse**,
and **four times** in the **refrain**, **five** in all,
so the total is **twelve** and counting.

The second reading is next, and the opening statement is:
“**Rejoice** always!” (1 Thes 5:16).

This brings the number of **references to joy** to **thirteen**.

All of this talk about “**JOY**” leads us to the gospel,
and surprisingly, on Gaudete Sunday, joy is not mentioned once in the gospel.

In the **gospel** a **new word** comes to the forefront: **testify**.

“He [John] came for **testimony**” (Jn 1:6a).

He came “to **testify**” (Jn 1:6b).

He came “to **testify** to the light” (Jn 1:8b).

“This is the **testimony** of John” (Jn 1:19).

This is **four times** for “**testify**.”

The shift is from joy to testify, and they are connected:

John’s testimony about Jesus is **joyful news**.

Testimony is given by a **witness**,

and a witness speaks in **trial**,

and a trial happens in **court**.

Our gospel today is part of a **court scene**.

Each of the **four gospels** has an **overarching literary plan**,

a design feature that unifies the entire gospel story.

Matthew’s gospel is written in **five parts**

to mimic the **Mosaic Law** that is given in five books (Gen, Ex, Lev, Num, Dt).

Mark’s gospel has many triplets, combinations of threes,

and it reads like a **homily**,

and great oratory is done in threes:

make the point, repeat the point, drive home the point, and move on.

Luke’s gospel is a **travelogue** or a journey narrative,

the trip from Galilee to Jerusalem.

And, very importantly for our purposes today,

John’s gospel is written as a **court case** or a **trial**,

and after all of the **evidence** is presented,

the evangelist hopes that we will return a **verdict** that

“Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” (Jn 20:31).

Such a decision would be a very **joyful verdict**.

The **court building** is the **Grand Hall** at the south end of the Temple Mount.
The **court room** is the **Sanhedrin's chambers**.
The **chief justice**, the presiding judge, is **Caiaphas**, the high priest.
The **prosecuting attorney** is a **lawyer**, a **scribe**, an expert in the Mosaic Law.
The **defense attorney** is the **author of the Fourth Gospel**, John the evangelist.
The **defendant** is **Jesus**.
The **charge** is "**criminal impersonation** of the Messiah."
And very importantly, the **jury** is **you** and **me**.

The defense attorney had to submit a **witness list** to the judge and the prosecution,
and the **evangelist** put together a list of **fantastic witnesses** to bring testimony on Jesus' behalf.

Every good defense attorney begins with a **strong opening statement**,
leads with a **star witness**,
then calls a number of other **solid witnesses**,
and **finishes** with the **best witness** of all, *the star witness*,
the one who will give the most persuasive and compelling argument,
before making his closing argument.

John called one great witness to the stand after another.

Imagine listening to the **bride and groom at Cana**.

They testified, Jesus changed water into wine and "saved" our wedding (Jn 2:1-11).
Then **Nicodemus** came forward and testified how he spoke to Jesus one night (Jn 3:1-21).
Then the **woman at the well** testified about living water (Jn 4:4-42).
Next, the **royal official** testified about how Jesus cured his son (Jn 4:46-54).
Next, a **man** who had been **crippled 38 years** testified
how Jesus cured him at the Pools of Bethesda (Jn 5:1-9).

The evangelist called one witness after another.
He kept his **star witness** for last, **Lazarus**.
Lazarus testified, "Jesus raised me from the dead!" (see Jn 11:43-44).
It is impossible to do better than that.

Today's gospel is the **lead witness**, the first witness called to the stand,
to make a **strong impression** on us, the jury.

The evangelist called **John the Baptist** to the stand first.
The Baptist was a **very credible** witness.
He was the **great prophet** in the desert.
Hundreds, **thousands**, had gone out to the desert to **hear his preaching**.
The Baptist **changed countless lives** as people decided to turn away from sin.
The Baptist's word would be **powerful** and **trustworthy**;
it would carry **enormous weight**.

A court officer motioned to the Baptist to take the stand.

As he stood before the courtroom, the court officer instructed him:

“State **your name**.”

He replied, “**I am John**, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the Baptizer.”

The court officer continued,

“Do you solemnly swear to **tell the truth**, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,
so help you God?”

John replied: “**I do**.”

With this, the questions began.

The prosecuting attorney asked: “Are you the **Messiah**?” (paraphrase, Jn 1:19).

The Baptist replied firmly, “I am not the Messiah” (Jn 1:20).

Probing further, the prosecutor asked, “Are you **Elijah**?” (Jn 1:21a).

The Baptist declared emphatically, “I am not” (Jn 1:21a).

The prosecutor pressed on: “Are you *the prophet*?” (Jn 1:21b).

[*The prophet would be the “new Moses,” the Messiah, see Dt 18:15.*]

The Baptist flatly refused: “No!” (Jn 1:21b), “Absolutely not!”

Losing patience, the prosecutor said, disrespectfully,

“Tell us who you are?” (Jn 1:22).

The Baptist quoted scripture back to the lawyers: “I am a voice in the desert” (Is 40:3).

Then the Baptist testified to the whole courtroom:

“There is **one among you** ... the one who is coming after me” (Jn 1:26,27).

The Baptist’s testimony was referring to **Jesus**:

“**Jesus, the Messiah, is here**. The **Messiah** is **present among us**” (paraphrase, Jn 1:26,27).

The Baptist testified, “This man **Jesus**, our **Messiah**,

is **so great, so awesome**, that I am **unworthy** to **untie his sandals**” (paraphrase, Jn 1:27).

On this **Third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday**,

the **Baptist**, the **lead witness**, testified that Jesus,

the one born on the first Christmas, **Jesus**, truly is the **Messiah**.

There is too much **gloom and doom, darkness and sadness**, in our world.

The evangelist wants **us**, the **jury**, to return our **verdict** that **Jesus** is the **Messiah**.

If we **accept Jesus**, born of Mary in Bethlehem on the first Christmas,

no matter what our troubles we may be,

we will **experience great joy**.