

Third Sun in Advent – Cycle A

A man who had been out of work for several months, was having trouble paying his bills, and was getting a little desperate. So he took a job at the local zoo...The zoo's main attraction – the gorilla – had died suddenly, and they needed someone to put on a gorilla suit and take the gorilla's place until the zoo could locate another real gorilla....His boss told him that it was very important not to do anything that would give visitors a clue that he wasn't a real gorilla... The job was very simple. He'd spend a lot of time in his gorilla outfit sitting on a big rock... Several times a day he would grab onto a long rope and swing on it. He would swing from his rock across the lion's pit to the other side, and then swing back over the lion's pit to his rock... This went on for a week and no one ever suspected that he wasn't a real gorilla...Until one day he got a little careless, and as he swung over the lion's pit he lost his grip on the rope and fell right into the pit.... As he lay on the ground, too stunned to move, he saw crouching no more than 20 yards away was this huge, vicious lion.... Frightened out of his wits, he immediately began yelling, "Help! Somebody get me outta here!"...The lion started to walk slowly toward him. His yells got louder and more frantic. Now the beast was so close he could feel its hot breath,...and his yells turned to screams of terror. Finally, the lion was right in his face. The lion opened its mouth...and said..., "Shut up, you idiot, before you get us both fired!"

I know what you're thinking...How's he going to connect that silly story to today's readings? ...Well, I confess that I told that story because the 3rd Sunday of Advent is traditionally called Rejoice Sunday; that's why we light the rose-colored candle in the middle of all the purple ones.- And I thought we should rejoice and laugh a little as we prepare for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ... But this silly story DOES have a point...The man in the gorilla suit came face to face with what he thought was a ferocious lion and he expected the beast to attack him and tear him to pieces because that's what lions do...Fortunately, his expectations turned out to be wrong...The lion didn't act the way he had expected. ...Wrong expectations: that's kind of what happened to John the Baptist in today's Gospel.

John – the fearless prophet - is languishing in King Herod's prison...Quite a drastic come down from his days preaching hell-fire and brimstone...announcing, proclaiming to everyone that the Messiah was coming....In his book, *Life of Christ*, Bishop Fulton Sheen says that there in that jail, John is discouraged and perhaps close to despair.... He had spent his whole life waiting for the Messiah, and the last 3 yrs preparing the people for His coming, and now the Messiah has come – or so John thought – and where's John? Rotting in a dark, dirty dungeon wondering if he would ever get out.Somehow, though, while in prison, John had gotten reports of what Jesus was doing and it was nothing like what he expected...John had been preaching about a Messiah who would come like a fierce warrior to bring God's judgement upon the earth, ...vanquish the forces of evil and liberate the nation of Israel from Roman rule,...But - like the lion in the story - Jesus acted differently than expected....John must've recalled baptizing Jesus, ...and hearing the voice from heaven thunder, "This is my beloved Son."...He must've thought to himself, "This Jesus has to be the Messiah,...but why wasn't He acting like one? Have I made a mistake? Is this really the Christ?"...John had to find out, so he sent two of his followers to ask Jesus: "Are you the One, or should we look for another?"

And what answer did Jesus give the messengers? Not a direct YES or NO...That's never His style....Instead, Jesus tells them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the Good News preached to them."...Basically, what Jesus said was: "Look around guys; see for yourself how people's lives are being changed because of who I am and what I am doing. Go back and tell John the kind of Messiah you see."...Now, we're never told how John reacted to Jesus' answer,...but that's not as important as how **WE** react....,because Jesus answers us the same

way whenever we –like John- are discouraged, on the edge of despair, full of doubts,... and we ask Him: "Are you the One – Jesus -or should I look elsewhere?"...He says to us, "Look around. See how I've come to those who have let me into their lives...See how I've made their lives better... You don't have to look anywhere else."

That's what He's telling us: "I AM the One. You don't have to look anywhere else." Now I'll bet many of us here believe this....I believe it because every time I am up here on the altar, I look out and I see faces of people I have come to know and care about over the last 36 yrs ...and I know that many of you have dealt with some pretty hard stuff - some of you are doing that right now. I've seen how you have drawn strength from your faith in Jesus Christ and how you have let Him come into those difficult, tough situations:...a sudden, tragic death...a long, hard battle with cancer,...a marriage going badly. ...losing your job.....parents splitting up... a son or daughter choosing to go in the wrong direction...just to name a few....I've seen you call on Jesus for His help...and I've seen how He came to you, and how He gave you strength when you were weak,... courage when you were afraid, ...wisdom when you were confused,...and peace when you were anxious...I've seen it often enough, so I know Jesus IS the **ONE!!**. ...I know He is the answer. I know He is the solution...**You know this too**. Yet, even so, too often we look someware else....not only in handling the BIG problems...but in handling the everyday pressures and stresses we all face,...and that can really weigh us down...Too often we look to other people or things...Too often we hang our hopes for peace and happiness on some person or some thing other than Jesus Christ....We don't really let Him into the nitty-gritty of our lives.

When you've been preaching for more than 13 yrs, it's hard not to repeat yourself, so it's likely you have heard me say this before: if we want to make our life as good as it can be – in spite of the problems and pains and pressures – we must make Jesus "number 1"...We must make our relationship with Jesus our highest priority...Bishop Clark said this two weekends ago in his letter to us in which he acknowledged the problems and pains and pressures afflicting our local church...and declared that it was time for a spiritual renewal...He invited us to join him in a commitment to nourish what he believes is most important – a personal relationship with Jesus, our Lord and Savior...He told us that our faith has never been about buildings or boundaries or things. ...It's about HIM (*point to +*)...It's about Jesus Christ...no one else...nothing else...Our faith begins and ends with Jesus Christ! ... Christianity is about KNOWING Jesus Christ...not just knowing ABOUT Him, but knowing Him personally as our Lord and Savior...connecting with Him on a heart level as well as a head level...

A good way for us to do this is to take the time, make the time, to spend with Jesus - as our Bishop suggests - through prayer and Scripture...especially the Gospels....Talk to Jesus. ...listen to Jesus...have a conversation with Him just like you would a friend...It can be a special time you set aside each day, but it can also be any time you have the chance...while you're out walking,...as you're cooking. ...when you're on the treadmill...in study hall... in your car waiting for the train to go by... Find a quiet place to read and meditate on the Gospels – take 5 or 10 minutes a day...**turn off the radio and TV, get away from the comp./video games...silence the cell phone...**Is there any one of us that can't spare 5-10 min to get to know Jesus better? ...There's so much in the Gospels that reveals the heart of Jesus,...that shows us the real Jesus....and there's so much in them that shows how much He wants us to let Him into our life, into our pain, into our joys, into every big and tiny part of our life.

When we connect with Jesus through prayer and through Scripture,...When we connect on a personal level, we'll begin to see things change in our lives.... We start to change...We find ourselves making better choices than the ones we've been making....We're friendlier. We're more positive, ...more upbeat.... We see beauty where we never noticed it before...We sit closer to the front of the church and get deeper into the liturgy....We listen more closely to the readings from Scripture....We sing more, we pray more.... Receiving communion becomes one

of the most precious moments in our weekly – maybe even daily – lives...We take the Body of Christ into our own bodies with a smile on our face: “Happy are those who are called to His supper.” ...We leave here filled with Christ, ready to bring Christ out there where He needs to be...These changes will happen. Not all at once. Not without setbacks and struggles and troubles. That’s all part of it - just ask John the Baptist....But these changes will happen,...and we will finally understand why - in the dark purple days of Advent - we light the rose-colored candle that tells us to REJOICE!,....It’s because Emmanuel, our Lord, is here with us...Truth is, He has never really left....And so we pray a joyful prayer, silently thanking God for sending us His Son...our Lord...our Savior.....AMEN.