

Third Sunday of Advent - A

The message of St. John the Baptist that we heard in last Sunday's Gospel included the words,

"He, [meaning the Messiah,] will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

That's how John, the prophet, read the scriptural tradition about the Messiah: one who would bring the wrath of God with him.

Then, after John's arrested and put into prison, his disciples come to him with reports about Jesus, and they paint a different picture:

Jesus is not burning anything. Instead his activity has a lot more to do with restoring than with purifying with an unquenchable fire.

John predicted an apocalypse, but Jesus' interpretation of the same scriptural tradition emphasized God's offer of salvation more than focusing on sin and punishment.

Thus John's question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

Jesus tended to avoid that sort of question; it was too tied up with each person's definition of a messiah.

Turning the question back on them, Jesus told John's disciples to look at

what they had seen and heard in his presence. He quotes Isaiah's prophecy about how the Messiah's coming would be. He tells them, "Judge for yourselves. What kind of activity best demonstrates God's presence?"

Jesus gave evidence from his works rather than words. Wherever he encountered people, the result was transformation: the blind saw, the deaf heard, people were restored to the fullness of their humanity in a community of love.

Today's celebration of Gaudete Sunday asks us to judge our faith in the light of Jesus' message.

What does the salvation we hope to see look like?

Are we waiting for those who oppose us to get their comeuppance or do we long for the transformation of sinners—including ourselves?

Many in today's world seem to offer the first option.

It is the general solution offered by prisons, war and every other form of vengeance.

The second option is much costlier. It requires real love to hope for the transformative salvation of those who have done us harm, and it requires humble courage to look for our own conversion.

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Gaudete Sunday invites us to rejoice in all that is good around us.

It challenges us to recognize the presence of God in everything that promotes freedom from sin and oppression and communion with God, others, and our deepest selves.

The more we participate in Jesus' work of transformation, the more we will understand that we have encountered God with us, God who is for us, and that we need not look for another.