Dec. 16, 2018 | Third Sunday of Advent

Zep 3:14-18a  
Phil 4:4-7  
Lk 3:10-18

By Rev. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, Ph.D.

When we see and hear a true prophet, someone who proclaims God’s will by word and deed, and we are open to receive that challenging message, we are drawn to them like the crowds are to John the Baptist in today’s Gospel passage. True prophets, like John and the Hebrew prophets who came before him, do not stop to focus on themselves or mistake the people’s attraction to God for a celebrity attraction to themselves, but always point beyond to the One whose message they proclaim. It is in this spirit that John rebuts the crowd’s desire to make him into their messiah, stating bluntly: “One mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.”

One of the striking things about John’s prophetic message is that it is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach. While God remains one, the reception of God’s Word is always particular, contextual, and unique. Tax collectors, fishermen, and religious leaders all have different social locations that affect the manner in which the Word of God is received and how that call is meant to be lived out. At times we might think Christianity is easily conveyed in universal, singular, and unchanging form—if you just commit these principles to memory, study the catechism, and recall passages from scripture verbatim, you’ll be all set. But this is not how the Word of God works.

God speaks to the situations in which we find ourselves, acknowledges the circumstances of our lives—the good and the bad, the holy and the sinful—in the same way Jesus did in his public ministry and John the Baptist did before him.

For those for whom life is comfortable and easy, the Word of God may come in challenging and uneasy ways. One thinks of the wealthy young man that walked away from Jesus because he had many possessions, or the various religious leaders threatened by Jesus’s upending of the systemic status quo, which robbed widows of their remaining money or placed difficult burdens on the shoulders of others without raising a finger to assist them.

For those for whom life is hard and burdensome, the Word of God may come in the spirit of this Third Sunday of Advent, which is known as Gaudete Sunday. Rejoice! For the Lord hears the cry of the poor (Psalm 34) and takes the side of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the refugee, and those despised, forgotten, and marginalized communities in society.

As we continue to celebrate the season of hopeful waiting, the already not yet of the Lord’s arrival, may we allow the Word of God to take root in our hearts at this particular time and in this particular place. If we are in need of being challenged, shaken up, or awoken by God’s Word may we be receptive to the conversion to which God calls us. If we are in need of comfort or consolation, may we hear the invitation to rejoice this day and place our trust and prayers in the Lord as our Second Reading reminds us to do. One mightier than us is coming, and has come before, but in the meantime, it is up to us to do our part in announcing the in-breaking of God’s Reign by our words and with concrete actions.

Rev. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Systematic Theology and Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.