

Waiting is hard. But this season of Advent is all about waiting. And it seems the longer we wait for something the easier it becomes to believe that it might not happen. Our hope deflates. As we did last week, we hear again today from John the Baptist. You'll recall last week he boldly declared that *"the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* Who would have doubted John's powerful testimony, even if they didn't know exactly who John was talking about?

Yet this week John is in a different place and he sounds very different. Instead of a commanding voice from the open spaces of the Judean desert, he ponders quietly from the confines of a prison cell. With nothing but time and solitude, he waited and it seems that maybe he wondered: *Is Jesus really the one who is to come? Is this really the long-expected messiah?* I wonder if the longer John waited, the less he would have been certain about what he had once proclaimed.

## OUR WAITING

And we are awaiting a promise fulfilled too, are we not? In fact, that's why we're here, in anticipation, awaiting Jesus' return. But is not doubt, even in the midst of belief, simply part of the human condition? *Is he for real?* Maybe like John, we ask ourselves: *if we believe Jesus is the one who liberated us from sin and restored us to God, why are things like they are? Why are people starving? Why is life so hard for some? Why is there war and death? Why am I lonely?* The longer we wait, the more these questions nag at us and doubt finds its way into our hearts and minds, deflating hope.

Waiting is one word we associate with Advent, but as I mentioned, so is hope. *Advent hope*. The rose candle today shines in testimony to that sentiment. There are three virtues that we call 'theological virtues', meaning that they are not attained by mere reason, but instead by grace: *faith, hope and love*. For us as Christians, hope is the understanding that God has something more, something good in store for us, beyond our present experience. And hope enables us to deal with the doubts that inevitably set in: doubts that make us question the promise held in Jesus, as we see whatever troubling realities around us. Because hope isn't oblivious or naïve. It doesn't ignore the fact that there is suffering and evil in the world, but it allows us to see beyond these realities: something beyond our natural vision; something that only the vision of faith can see.

I remind us of the basis of our hope: the one that will come into this world, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary will show us how we are to live. As he gave life where there was once death and brought good news to the poor, he calls us to act as well. And we must. But our Christian hope also realizes that despite our response to his command, in this life and in this world we will never eradicate the things he came to eliminate: suffering, poverty, sin and death. So as combat these things, and yet they remain, hope keeps us fixed on something beyond, which only the eyes of faith can see, remembering that God has something more, something good, beyond our present experience.

Hope considers the response of our Blessed Mother, as we heard in the Thursday's solemnity: *"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."* In her 'yes' to God's plan, hope began to swell within us all. The spirit of the Lord then overshadowed her and the life that is our hope began within her.

## OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

Tomorrow we will celebrate *Our Lady of Guadalupe*. It marks the anniversary of the day in 1531 that our Blessed Mother appeared to the peasant man named Juan Diego in the northern part of what is today Mexico City. While walking, he heard the most beautiful music seemingly from nowhere, and was perplexed by it. Suddenly, he saw a woman with clothing, radiant as the sun and sparkling like jewels. She said to him in most affectionate of terms, *"My little Juanito, fear not. I am the ever-virgin Mary, Mother of the True Divinity. I want you to send a message to the bishop, Friar Zumárraga, that I would like a temple built here, so that all people can know that I am their mother."*

This simple man, Juan, did not believe that he was prepared for such a great task, yet he obeyed. But it was not without its obstacles: being dismissed at first by the bishop, dealing with distractions due to a serious family illness as well as his own self-doubts. Bishop Zumárraga doubted Juan's message, but told Juan that if he could provide proof of the Blessed Mother's request, he would then consider it.

Three days later, Juan encountered the lady for what was the third time, and she gave him proof, instructing him to walk ahead, to a place that was just out of sight, and to find the flowers there and gather them. *Flowers?* In the cool frost of December there should not have been flowers, yet there they were, just as she had said: blossoming, fragrant and dripping with dewdrops like precious pearls. As she directed, Juan gathered them and wrapped them in his cloak (called a tilma), sort of a peasant's garment, woven from fibers of the cactus plant. He carried them at once to the bishop, concealed within the tilma, then at last, allowed it to unfurl. Suddenly, before the eyes of all present, was the beautiful image that we have come to know.

And if you look at the image, you'll notice that around Mary's dress is a band. Ordinarily it would be worn around a woman's stomach, but hers is worn higher, where a woman who is pregnant would wear it: it's a maternity band. Clearly, Mary wanted us to understand that she does not just bring herself, she brings us the one we await, our hope: the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

As this season of Advent moves along calling us to wait....and to wait....we are mindful of the reality in which we find ourselves: that waiting for Jesus and the weight of the world can replace our hope with doubt. Hope, by its very definition, infers a mind and heart fixed on the future—anticipation, and without it we fail to be authentically Christian. But to live in it authentically also demands that we are not merely passive in our anticipation, but that we are instruments of ushering-in that hope, that promise. So for this hope, let us turn toward our Mother, and let us cling to the hope held in her womb: it is this hope that compels us to respond while in this world, while fixing our gaze on the promise of the next world where he and his mother us.