

Christmas is just around the corner. Good or not, it is probably the busiest time of the year for many people. I had a day off this Friday and had a chance to go to San Francisco with a friend.

It was only around noon and there were already lots of people—lots of people at stores, restaurants, and on the streets. No matter where I went, I found one thing in common: people were in good mood. I could feel the spirit of Christmas right there; everyone seemed to be enjoying the season. It was wonderful to be a part of that crowd.

In the evening that day, there was a party at the Seminary; people there said to each other, “Merry Almost-Christmas!” So here we are; Christmas is almost there.

But the texts for this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent do not quite seem to be ready for Christmas yet. We are still meeting with John the Baptist-- the man who will hardly show up at a Christmas party, I imagine.

The question John has for Jesus is, “Are you the One? Or should we wait for another one?” Are you the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior? Are you the one who will solve all the problems we have in the world?

Before we do anything, my first question is what happened to this man? Isn't this man, John the Baptist, the one who surely recognized Jesus as the One God sent and humbled himself before him saying, “I am the one to be baptized by you.”

Then what happened?

The text says John is in prison. In prison! Does it mean that because he was incarcerated he lost his faith? Is he in doubt? What happened?

We know his popular sermon in the wilderness: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at near?” He wasn't afraid to say, “You, brood of vipers!” to the church leaders. And he even stood up to confront the King Herod when he took his brother's wife. In fact, that was why he was put in jail.

Then, what happened? Why did he say: “Are you the one?”

When I was working on this sermon throughout the week, for some reason, John’s question grabbed me tight and let me think for a while. And I myself asked many big questions!

O Jesus, if you are ever coming back. Show some signs. When and what would that be? Are you really coming back?

O God, do something now! Show us that you are the sovereign, Almighty God! Do something so that people don’t have to sleep on the streets. Do something so that the war may end right away. Do something that people do not have to starve! Do something so that people don’t have to worry about money! Do something, do something! Not later, do it right now!

How about this question: “Jesus, the good old days are gone; the church has been declining. We are now here in the church but many more people would rather be at shopping mall. Christmas seems to be more about us rather than you. Jesus, show me some signs that we are still in the right track!”

We have lots of questions. Some people even wonder about what God can do in their difficult lives.

John was in big disappointment because things were not working out like he had expected. Maybe he wanted a political change; he wanted to see the change right away. He was hoping for real fireworks when the Messiah came—military might, some cosmic signs, earthmoving changes.

Today’s Isaiah text just says that. That was the vision of the New Zion John had in his minds: "when God comes, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you... and the ransomed of the LORD will return. Verse 10 says:

They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

So it was not surprising that they wanted Jesus to drive out the Romans and restore David's Kingdom in Israel.

With Jesus' coming, however, these things did not happen.

But, the signs Jesus wanted to show them were quite different:

Jesus says to John and us: "Go and tell the world what you hear and see-- The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

"What you see around you—small things, familiar things, loving-God-and-neighbor things—these are the signs that the Messiah has come."

No earthquake, no big political revolution—just the ordinary, ongoing work of participating in God's mission through words and deeds.

God's kingdom cannot be measured by quantity. It is measured by the quality.

After coming back from the trip to the Middle East a couple of month ago, I get very nervous whenever I hear the word "Zion" that we see in today's Isaiah text.

The reason is that there are lots of Christians in this country who send money to Israel because they believe the money will help the Jewish people to return to Israel and restore the Zion in Jerusalem.

What they call "Christian Zionism" teaches that the money will eventually help the second coming of Jesus Christ. But in reality, most of the money they send from here is used to make other people suffer in the region. The money is used to oppress many Palestinian people including Christians, beloved God's people.

It is wrong.

God does not need our help from in restoring His kingdom. Jesus does not need our help for his return either. Jesus' return can happen any time and

any where. What we need is follow Jesus and do what he taught us to do—which is love.

As we approach Christmas, our hearts are full of expectations and anticipations. I suppose God also comes to us with expectations—his expectations of us are that we show our passion for Jesus and compassion for our brothers and sisters around us:

A note to a friend, a phone call to a neighbor, a visit to someone who is lonely, a financial gift for our neighbor and for the work of the gospel—all these are the signs we can show to the world that the Messiah has come.

I hope that each and every one of us can not only see and hear such signs among us and also show to others in our lives. Amen.