

**December 14 – Third Sunday of Advent**  
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Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11	God has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted
Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54	God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.
First Thessalonians 5:16-24	Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil.
John 1:6-8, 19-28	There is one among you whom you do not recognize.

There is a Buddhist story where, similar to what happens in today's gospel, people approach Buddha and ask him to explain exactly who he is. "Are you a god?" one person asked. "No," Buddha answered. "Well then, are you a saint?" another asked. Again Buddha replied no. "Are you a prophet?" A third time Buddha replied he was not. "Then what are you?" they demanded. Buddha replied, "I am awake."

Such a simple yet truthful and therefore powerful understanding of the importance of being awake, that is, totally aware, responsive and appreciative of the world around you and of one's particular situation is, unfortunately, also rare among followers of most religions.

Karl Marx criticized religion as the "opiate of the masses." That is, rather than awakening people to the reality of life, according to Marx it deadens them to their suffering and convinces them to put up with unjust and oppressive situations. Perhaps that's one way to test which religion is "true," since everyone who claims to be a believer thinks his or her religion is the right one. Does your faith call you forth to new life and to get involved in changing the world around you or is it an escape from the harsher realities of life? Marx could not be further from the truth, at least concerning true religion, which in fact calls people out of slavery into freedom.

Both Buddha and John the Baptist answer in ways that do not feed their egos but rather point to something greater and larger than themselves. Buddha could have claimed divinity and John could have claimed to be the Messiah, but such was their authentic understanding of their roles that each could resist the temptation to make themselves more than they were. This relationship between John and Jesus offers us a pattern for our own faith life. John is the voice (crying in the wilderness); Jesus is the Word. John is the lamp, burning brightly, as Jesus says of him; Christ is the Light. Everything that John said and did pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Advent invites us to enter into the stark desert of our hearts, far from the clutter of everyday concerns, to encounter and experience Jesus as Son of God and savior. But, having given our life to Christ, we now are called to enter fully into the world to extend God's liberating love to the people and places around us.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus quoted Isaiah to explain his role to bring glad tidings to the poor and to set captives free. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Mary exalted God who casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. Filled with the Holy Spirit, John risks his life to speak truth to power and point out that, for all their religiosity, the Pharisees and self-righteous people did not recognize God in their midst.

Do we recognize God in our midst, especially in the poor, the oppressed, the imprisoned? Advent calls us to light candles of justice to dispel the darkness of ignorance, bigotry and racism that distort the image of God. A candle sacrifices itself in order to give light. We, who await the Second Coming of Christ even as we prepare to celebrate his birth, are called to do no less.

*Now that the elections have taken place, respond to Maryknoll's invitation and engage policy makers on political and economic decisions that impact people around the world.*