

The military conquest of our troops in Afghanistan has restored some confidence to America. When planes attacked Washington and New York and when anthrax frightened our nation, we wondered many days if we would ever regain our strength. No one yet feels completely safe, but panic has died down.

On the afternoon of September 11, many Americans sought strength in a rather peculiar way. Oh, people came to church to find strength, and many contacted family members to find strength. But a lot of people did something else that day. They went to the gas station. We formed long lines at service stations charging exorbitant prices. Looking back on it, you have to wonder, what good does one tank of gas do in a national emergency? It's sad but true: we find strength in our cars.

When John the Baptist was arrested he spent a long time in jail. He lost the source of his strength. Without the freedom to preach, without a community of believers around him, without Jesus to talk to, John was scared. In today's gospel two of John's disciples visit him in prison. He discloses what's troubling him. He wants to know if Jesus is the Messiah. The disciples make the long trip back to Jesus. No cell phones in those days. You would think at a moment like this that Jesus would give a direct answer to the question "Are you the Messiah?" After all, he and John were very close. You would think, out of love for John, that Jesus would just say yes or no. But he doesn't. God rarely gives anyone a direct answer, yes or no.

Instead, Jesus gives an indirect answer. But it's a good one. He tells the messengers to tell John what they have heard and seen. The blind see. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. The poor have the good news preached to them. Everything that was prophesied about the Messiah is coming true in Jesus.

People with faith can still have doubts. Even John the Baptist doubted. We doubt God's goodness whenever we hear bad news about our health or the untimely death of someone we love. We doubt God's goodness when a terrorist gloats over his deeds and praises God for the inspiration. We doubt God's goodness when those who live in the Holy Land have made it a place of war. It is not unusual for people with faith to have doubts.

Jesus' advice works for us too. Pay attention to what you hear and see. Through health care, people live a long and better life. Through love, parents bring forth a baby. The giving of gifts, the faith of those who surround us at church, the cooperation among believers of different faiths – all these are signs we can hear and see that God continues to love and nurture the human race.

John's disciples did not hear and see a Messiah with troops, but a Messiah who healed. The greatest strength of America will not be in military conquests, but in aid, nutrition and generosity. If our faith has been shaken, we have entered into Advent, a time of waiting for salvation. We will find our strength when we live as disciples of the Messiah who takes care of those in need.