

Jesus appears in mid-stream

WHO ARE YOU?" "What do you think you're doing?" You might hurl those questions at an intruder on your property. Israel's nervous leaders posed them to a religious transgressor: John the Baptist (John 1:6-8, 19-28). The suspenseful passage we hear next Sunday causes us to wonder along with these officious visitors just who John is and what he's up to. Celebrating Advent is like reading a good mystery. While we're getting to know the characters, we fear something awful is about to happen, but we still hope for a happy ending.

Two reasons explain why we hear this passage on the third Sunday of Advent this year. One, the third Sunday, like the second, always draws our attention to John the Baptist. Two, this year we feature Mark's Gospel; however, it doesn't include enough about John the Baptist to satisfy our needs, so we reach over to John's Gospel to fill the void.

The fourth Gospel differs in style and organization from the other three. Where Matthew, Mark and Luke relate many short stories about Jesus, John recounts a few longer incidents. John seems freer with the material, but he invites us to reflect deeply on its meaning.

THE FIRST CHAPTER of John's Gospel provides a good example of John's style. At times it seems mystical; other times factual. The first words of his Gospel make up one of the most memorable lines in the Bible, "In the beginning was the Word." That sentence introduces a meditation on Jesus which can be hard to understand, but ripe for reflection. John introduces Jesus as the Word of God, the aspect of God which communicates with the created world. That Word was God and existed before all else. In time, that word took flesh in the person of Jesus. This lyrical explanation of God's Word may have started as an early Christian hymn which John adopted and upon which he commented.

Our text for next Sunday's Gospel starts with

the verses which comment on that hymn. Imagine it this way: You're singing a popular song, but you stop after each verse so someone can explain more about the characters in the lyrics. That's how the opening of John's Gospel works. What we hear at the beginning of next Sunday's Gospel is the commentary, minus the song. (The song itself is the Gospel for Christmas Day.)

The full text we'll hear contains this commentary and a story. The commentary tells us that John the Baptist was sent by God as a witness to the light, in order to bring us to faith in that light. Then we hear the dialogue which unfolds between John and the representatives of Israel's leaders. Already in chapter one, the conflict between Jesus and his adversaries has appeared in the story.

They ask two questions. "Who are you?" "Why are you baptizing?" They ask not as potential followers, but as leaders suspicious of insurrection. As the chapters of the Gospel turn, they'll get more trouble than they feared.

John the Baptist gives a poetic answer to the first question. Who is he? He starts by saying who he's not. Not the Messiah. Not Elijah. Not the prophet. In other words, not the leader who will take Israel through revolution. That may have brought some comfort to the questioner until John continued: "I am the voice." We have already heard about the "Word." Now we meet the voice.

WHY DOES HE baptize? Because someone is coming. In fact, he's already here. And great as John is, he is unworthy to loosen the strap of the sandal of the one who is to come. John baptizes to announce the coming of Jesus.

When Jesus finally appears on the scene in the fourth Gospel, he does so at the Jordan, with John the Baptist. He does not appear in Bethlehem, nor in Nazareth. You might say he appears in mid-stream — at the Jordan, well into his life, ready to begin his public ministry. But in another way he has already appeared as the Word who existed from before the beginning.

The questions which launch John's Gospel are "Who?" and "Why?" The Advent season will help us answer the same questions about Jesus: Who is he? Why has he come? □

Father Paul Turner is pastor of St. John Francis Regis Parish, Kansas City.



Daily Scripture Readings

Second Sunday of Advent

Sunday December 8

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

Psalms 85:9-14

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

Immaculate Conception

Monday, December 9

Genesis 3:9-15, 20

Psalms 98:1-4

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

Luke 1:26-38

Tuesday, December 10

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalms 96:1-3, 10-13

Matthew 18:12-14

Wednesday, December 11

Isaiah 40:25-31

Psalms 103:1-4, 8, 10

Matthew 11:28-30

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Thursday, December 12

Zechariah 2:14-17

Psalms 45:11-12, 14-17

Luke 1:39-47

Friday, December 13

Isaiah 48:17-19

Psalms 1:1-4, 6

Matthew 11:16-19

Saturday, December 14

Sirach 48:1-4, 9-11

Psalms 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

Matthew 17:10-13

Third Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 15

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11

(Ps) Luke 1:45-50, 53-54

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28