

REVIVAL!
3rd Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2021
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The day was October 30, 1976. I had just turned 13. My family of five was loading into our station wagon for a trip to the City of Pontiac, a suburb outside Detroit. As country bumpkins, we had never been to a big city... and this was extra special... we were on our way to a Billy Graham Revival at the recently completed Pontiac Silverdome. The Silverdome was the largest stadium in the National Football League and the only one in nation with an inflatable roof. I was pretty wide-eyed as we arrived, seeing the massive stadium and the thousands of people streaming into the venue like ants to their hill.

Have you ever attended a revival? They are unique experiences where one gets “juiced-up” for Christ listening to witnesses, singing with the masses, feeling the booming music and attending breakout sessions with like-minded Christians. A revival taps into the emotional aspect of our faith, and, we like it! There are events like Billy Graham Crusades, groups like Promise Keepers or Catholic Charismatics, and

our own Queen of Saints' teenagers that just returned from National Catholic Youth Conference – NCYC. It is in the light of these rivals, being juiced-up for Jesus, that we find John the Baptist in our gospel today.

John, arguably one of the greatest evangelists in the New Testament, has been roaming throughout Judea with his message of repentance, baptism and preparing the way for the Messiah... his preaching can easily be seen as some of the first-ever revivals. John has amassed a large group of followers and it is at one of his assemblies that the enthusiastic crowds begin to ask John what they must do for salvation.

He tells them, if you have two cloaks, give one to the poor. He tells the tax collectors, do not charge more than that which is due. To the soldiers, do not extort, falsely accuse and be satisfied with your pay. All of these attributes are applicable to us today. Donate to the poor, give of your time to those who are less fortunate... we find this easy to do around this time of year. It feels good to drop some change

in a Salvation Army kettle or to take an angel from a giving tree to help a child in need but John pleads with us to this all year long. In our daily dealings, we are to be honest. If someone gives you more change than you are due, return it. If you find an item you did not pay for, make restitution. If you loan money, do not charge unfair interest. This is the basic message to the tax collectors and us. From the direction John gives to the soldiers... do not squeeze your friends, family or strangers for something you are not entitled to... don't gossip to damage another or to make yourself appear better... work honestly and accept honest pay. These are all wonderful virtues to apply to *our* lives.

And, let's look at *who* asked these questions – the crowd, the tax collectors and the soldiers, likely the King Herod's Jewish militia. The crowd is looked down upon by the religious authorities as ignorant and uneducated. The tax collectors are considered sinners for taking more than what was due. The soldiers are hated as enforcers of Roman rule. These three groups were some of the most despised, they are the marginalized, the ones on the fringes of society that could be

overlooked and forgotten but John preaches justice for the poor and disregarded... the same message that Jesus would soon be teaching.

And so the crowd begins to wonder if John might be the messiah... notice the gospel says, “to question in their hearts” for to say it out loud would be blasphemous and invite a stoning. John, I suspect to the crowds’ disappointment, says he is not the messiah for another “mightier than I is coming.” John doesn’t even see himself worthy enough to perform the slave’s task of removing the sandals of the coming Christ. Unlike his baptisms with water, John says the messiah will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire... a foretelling of Pentecost and our sacrament of Confirmation.

To drive home his message of repentance, John uses agricultural imagery to illustrate what is to come. This “winnowing” is done with a large fork-like shovel. Heads of wheat are walked upon to separate the kernel from the covering. The pile is scooped up, flung into the air with the kernels falling to the ground and the chaff blowing away on the wind. The kernels, symbolizing the faithful, could then be collected and

stored-up in the barn while the chaff, the evil and useless, is burned away. Of course, Christ is seen in the farmer. This was a pretty strong picture for John's listeners and is relatable to us as a rural, farming community.

St. Luke tells us that John concluded his preaching, his revival, by "exhorting them many other ways." In other words, John the Baptizer strongly *encouraged*, he urged them *fiercely* to repent and make way for the coming Messiah just as we are to do for the Second Coming. "He preached good news," St. Luke writes... not ***the*** good news... but good news of God's unfolding plan for salvation found in his son, Jesus.

So, what's the message we hear today? Certainly one of being honest in all things, helping the poor and assisting the marginalized. But, perhaps, more importantly, it is the question asked of John by all three groups: "What should we do?" Or on a personal level, "What should I do?" What should I do be more like John, the evangelist, never fearful or embarrassed to proclaim the good news? What should I do

be more like Jesus, the messiah, loving and forgiving to all? What should I do to be a better Catholic, joyous in the practice of my faith?

Back at the Silverdome, journalist Mike Norton of the “Michigan Daily” wrote of the Billy Graham revival... the crusade has ended... “The 40,000 audience members rise from their seats, one by one, two by two. Some are talking excitedly with friends, some in thoughtful silence, they leave the cavernous stadium, back out to their cars and the buses, back to a sinful world.”

And so we ask our Savior as a leave Mass which is our weekly revival, “What should I do to make my community a better place?” “What should I do to be a better person?” “What should I do to...?”