

December 2022

One of my many shortcomings, and there are many, involves gathering in social settings. I'm simply not very comfortable making small talk, working a room or forcing myself to be charming and delightful. So, you can just imagine how much I look forward to this time of year and holiday parties. While I appreciate the opportunity to visit with people, I'm just not great at mingling. So, if you ever find me off, alone in a corner, I want you to know it's not because my wife put me in time-out. Ok, I might be in time out but it's just as likely that I'm more comfortable sitting quietly off in a corner or better yet, staying home alone.

I think that most of us value the opportunity for some "alone" time in our lives. But the fact of the matter is, we are a people created to be in relationship with one another. And frankly, too much isolation and alone time inevitably leads to uncertainty, doubt, skepticism and even depression. According to the American Psychological Association, "isolation can ... cause depression, poor sleep quality, impaired executive function, accelerated cognitive decline, poor cardiovascular function and impaired immunity at every stage of life." Our bodies simply are not engineered to exist in isolation.

In our Gospel passage today, we find John the Baptist imprisoned for being critical of King Herod's immoral behavior. And during the isolation of his captivity, John begins to question his knowledge of Jesus as the Messiah. The same person, who leapt with joy in his mother's womb when Mary came to visit and was undoubtedly told by Elizabeth as he grew older that Mary was the mother of God, begins to question what he himself has been preaching. The same man who pointed toward Jesus and declared, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The same man, who as he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, heard the heavenly voice proclaim: "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased."

This John, in his loneliness and perhaps with feelings of abandonment begins to doubt the identity of the very Messiah that he had personally proclaimed. Isn't it amazing, how much our faith can waiver when we face life's struggles on our own?

Most of us can identify with John. I imagine that our faith is strongest when we sense that Jesus is by our side. Similarly, our faith tends to falter most when the circumstances of our lives leave us feeling isolated and alone. On those occasions when we feel like life has dealt us a bad hand, or when we feel that our prayers are going unanswered, or even in the midst of the tension and stress and the loneliness of the holiday season, we may find ourselves wondering, "where is Jesus?" And without evidence of his presence, we are likely to withdraw into the isolated corners of our lives. If left to languish there on our own, like John the Baptist, our faith is likely to falter.

At the low point of his isolation, John sought assurance that Jesus was the Christ. Especially, during these next two weeks, as we witness many of our family and friends reveling in the Christmas spirit, some of us will be wondering "where is Jesus?" Some of us will feel as if we've been abandoned. In the midst of struggling with cancer, or Alzheimer's, or Parkinson's, while mourning the loss of a loved one, or wrestling with divorce, addiction, abuse or simply loneliness, many of us will seek to withdraw to the isolation of a metaphorical corner.

Close your eyes, just for a moment. Surely you can picture a friend or family member who has withdrawn into isolation. Without saying so, those people are longing for proof that they haven't been abandoned. In a special way, especially during Advent and our prayerful preparation for the coming of our Lord and Savior, we are called to be the evidence of Jesus' loving care. We are called to engage and accompany the isolated and abandoned. Called to attend to one another with a phone call, a home visit, a shared meal, a hand held tight, a listening ear, a

quiet prayer or even a ride to Mass. Each and every one of us is aware of someone in our lives who is struggling. When we see that person standing alone in the corner, let's reach out and remind that person that they are not alone. By our caring presence, let us be Jesus' emissaries of the Advent virtues of hope, faith, joy and love.