

Almost all of us, at one time or another, have had the experience of playing a small role. Whether we were performing in a school play or a Christmas pageant, we know how it feels to prepare for weeks or months for a brief moment of attention. Or perhaps not even that — perhaps we never got a line at all and stayed in the background like a piece of the set. But a small role, performed well, contributes much to the whole experience.

John the Baptist is the epitome of this syndrome, a talented man relegated to a supporting role. He certainly excelled in his performance. He threw himself into the part. John is one of the most memorable figures in the New Testament besides Jesus himself. Who could forget his outlandish clothing, blunt statements, and questionable choices of food? And more importantly, his dedication to his thankless task: preparing and proclaiming the arrival of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. He became so well-known, so well-respected, that many thought John himself was the Messiah or another figure of Hebrew prophecy. These mistakes must have irked John. Today's Gospel suggests they happened all the time and threatened to defeat the purpose of John's very existence.

John the Baptist might not be many people's favorite saint, but he's a wonderful example for Christians in every age and circumstance, because he accomplished two of the most important imperatives of the life of faith: he understood what God was calling him to do and he gave everything he had to live out that calling. He gave his entire life over, zealously, to living on the terms God had laid out. Contrast that with the compromises that Christians commonly make with our observance today.

For all of us who dare to call ourselves faithful, John the Baptist is a great example to follow, broadly speaking. Granted, his was an extreme case. His vocation was unique. And he was called upon to pay the ultimate price of obedience to God. While we can and should rejoice in the courage, the witness, the faithfulness, and the spiritual glory of the company of martyrs, we can also rejoice that very few Christians in this or any age will meet this end. More than that, we can rejoice that while there is an absolute limit to how much we can suffer, there is no limit at all on the grace and joy that God wills for us and will give us in the fullness of God's time.

John's example is important to us because all Christians have a calling from God. This is inherent to baptism, but an aspect of baptism that doesn't get as much attention as it should. And strictly speaking, God calls each of us to do many things, in accordance with our circumstances and capabilities. But in an overarching way, our callings are also all the same, for we are all called to make ourselves better prepared to receive Christ into our hearts and our lives. This is an ongoing responsibility, not a seasonal one. And

like John himself, all Christians are called to proclaim the good news that God is doing a new thing for the world in Jesus Christ. Yes, all Christians are meant to be evangelists, not just the clergy.

So, discerning the specific vocation to which God is calling us is an important and ongoing task. Most of the time, when the church uses the word vocation, it's in the context of determining whether one is called to ordained ministry or the life of a monk or a nun. This is unfortunate because it obscures two realities about vocation. One is that a vocation is more likely to be secular than ecclesiastical. Following God's call is always a holy calling, regardless of where it leads. At Advent, we are exploring the connections between working life and faith in a new program called "God at Work," and hearing some of my parishioners stories has been fascinating and edifying. However, a second important reality about vocation is that one's vocation is not necessarily the same as one's occupation. Therefore, some of us will find personal spiritual fulfillment in the workplace, while others will find it elsewhere. What a friend of mine observed about my vocation is true of all: it's not a job, it's a lifestyle. Or, perhaps, just a life.

The important thing is that while in God's grand scheme of things, all of our roles are small, since we do have God-given roles, all of our lives have purpose, regardless of what we do for work, or even whether we have a job at all. God gives all of us inherent worth, but also created us to find our purpose and satisfaction in our relationships. As the prophet Isaiah said metaphorically, "For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." God chooses to bring the good things God intends for the world not by dropping them from heaven, but by having them grow up, individually, yet transforming the whole world.

Even Jesus was no exception; he was born and raised in full humanity, and humility, although his role was to be the greatest of all. But unlike any other human, he did not wilt and fall and return to the earth like a blade of grass. Although the season of Advent is when we focus on how Christ is coming into the world, we should never deny that he also lives among us now, mysteriously but powerfully, whether we are aware or not. We may wonder and rejoice that the one through whom all things were made, the way, the truth, and the life, is among us as one of us, working and caring and moving. And so he must be. For God would never give us a vocation without also giving us everything we need to fulfill it. A vocation we were capable of fulfilling on our own would be so meager as to be hardly worth giving in the first place. And Christ is sufficient to fulfill all our vocations.

So we need not be anxious. Merely open and prepared for God to be at work in us and through us. For our vocations have seasons just as our lives do. We are no less called to discern and prepare for our vocation as we are to carry it out. Similarly, by no means are reflection and refreshment opposed to the fulfillment of our vocations. Indeed, they are essential. But these seasons of vocation are not a sequence inexorably linked to the passage of time, as the seasons of our lives are. People move through the seasons of vocation at different times of their lives, according to God's will for them and their own faithfulness in responding to God.

Again I say, rejoice. The Spirit, working in us, is already doing infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. The Lord is stirring with great might and coming among us with bountiful grace and mercy. And Christ, the true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world again, in a new way.