

Hear and see

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The build-up to Christmas bombards our senses—the constant blinking of Christmas lights, the pervasive wafting of pine-scented potpourri, the drone of “sleigh-bells ringing.” No wonder we lose sight of what we’re really looking for in Advent, the signs of the one who is to come.

From the darkness of his prison cell, John hears about the ministry of Jesus and sends his disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Without being able to see for himself, John must grasp the larger messianic meaning of Jesus’ ministry through his disciples. Jesus responds with a direct appeal to their senses. “Go and tell John what you hear and see.”

The proof Jesus offers that the kingdom of God has drawn near is the healing of our bodies, the restoration of our senses. The blind see. The deaf hear. The lame walk. The poor hear good news. Unfortunately for John, the only glaring absence in this list of fulfillment from the prophet Isaiah is the release of the captives! John never will go free. But just in case people use John’s imprisonment to question significance of John’s life, Jesus turns to the crowd and asks them, “When you went out into the wilderness to see John, what did you go out to look at?” Three times he tests the crowd’s ability to perceive through their senses the activity of God in the person of John. Finally, in the echoes of Isaiah once again, Jesus says, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” John is more than a prophet; he is the preparer of the way.

The challenge for us in Advent is to allow Jesus to restore our senses, to have him open our eyes and ears so that we can go and tell others what we hear and see. Admittedly, from the darkness of our prison cells, it can be hard for us to grasp the larger messianic meaning of Jesus’ ministry. That’s the problem with the darkness; we lose our way, becoming blind and deaf to the fact that the kingdom of God is all around us.

In her Advent devotional *Night Visions*, Jan L. Richardson offers this: “These days bathe us in images of abundance and happiness, but we pray for those who do not find in this time a season of goodness and light. Give us eyes to see into the shadows cast by the millions of blinking lights; ears to listen beyond the carols to hear the anguished weeping; and hearts that long for the liberation your advent truly brings.”

Ultimately, the good news of Advent is that “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa. 9:2). It’s the increasing light of Advent that can help us cut through holiday haze and prepare to welcome the one who is coming.