

What has bowed your head down, recently? It seems that especially during Advent, people have their heads bowed down more than at other times of the year. They could be just watching their step, because with less than a moment's notice, you could find yourself flat on the ground, and Christmas is no fun when you're black and blue, spending it in the hospital. Maybe you have your head down right now as you are examining your list of countless things to do and to prepare before that holiday comes in just a few days' time, ready or not. Perhaps that particular bell-ringer at the store entrance has a knack for locking in too-direct of a gaze and you just don't want to make eye contact when you've got a busy schedule and no spare change... best to look down!

Do you perhaps have your head down in a different way, because you feel beaten, defeated with tension in your family that won't go away, hurt because someone sinned against you and won't admit it? Or maybe you want to clear the air and admit your fault with someone whom you hurt with your words and they refuse to forgive you? Our heads ought to be down, at least in a spiritual sense, because we must daily repent of our sins against God and against all our various neighbors in our lives. We hear the challenge that James handed to us in today's epistle reading, and we know we must be patient, we don't have the steadfastness of Job, but sometimes we feel like we have every bit of the troubles that he had! We must follow the example of the tax collector whom Jesus contrasted with the Pharisee in the Temple who prayed to himself, God I'm so grateful that I'm not

like those other sinners; he, on the other hand, wouldn't even look up to heaven, but said instead in bowed humbleness: God be merciful to me, a sinner!

You know our world has its head down—you can tell the signs of that are all around us. The difference, however, is that our world's head is down not in repentance or humility, but in self-worship. People are glued to blinking devices with images and evil propaganda that like to rewrite the narratives of what is good and what is not. Those whom we see in this world who reject our only Lord and Savior, are instead worshiping the only deity that they hold most dear—themselves. Their heads are down only because they would rather stare in absolute wonder at their own belly-button! It's all about my life, my needs, my body, my political party, my set of values, my wants. You are tempted to have your head down in that way, also, as am I.

You know what happens, though, when someone walks around too long with their head down all the time. It could lead to a funny bump on the head when she walks into a pole, or a quite frightful and deadly thing when he gets run over in the street. You are unaware of what is vitally important when you are not alert, and there is no way for you to tell what is right there in front of you. The more you stay bent down, the harder it is for you to get yourself straightened up again. I'm always getting told not to slouch over; I guess I'm not very easy to train in the fine art of good posture.

There was someone else who had his head down. Once again, we are talking about the designated preacher for the season of Advent, John the Baptist. This time, the Gospel records a moment once he had been thrown into prison, somewhere near the Dead Sea, as we suppose from archaeology and history, and he sent some loyal disciples of his to ask Jesus a question. It is quite a shocking question, considering that it came to Jesus from the once-courageous John the Baptist. After all, he was the one who pointed our Lord out and said, Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! Whether it was he who was discouraged, and had his head down in that nasty dungeon, or his disciples were the ones concerned, and John wanted to send them, heads down in their own disappointment, straight to the source to get the final word from Christ Himself, both would be answered in the same way. Jesus gave the perfect response to raise any head that might be bowed down with pain, repentance, sin, and sorrow. He says the same to you, with head bowed down in sorrow and discouragement:

Lift up your heads! So says the Psalm, and a few Advent hymns sing it, as well. Yes, there is a time to bow down in repentance and to sacrifice your personal desires and the world's self-worship that entices you. However, there is also a time to lift up your heads, to rejoice even in the midst of suffering, to straighten up and see your salvation coming ever nearer. We already heard in a reading a few weeks ago that when you witness the many frightful signs of the end of the world, those are actually the indicators that your coming Savior is about to rescue you. See that your salvation is drawing near! What Jesus says to John's disciples will raise up their—and John's

own—heads. Are you the promised Messiah, the Christ? Or should we be looking for another? Should we keep our heads down and ignore our seemingly vain hopes that God is going to fulfill His Word right here in front of us? Will He really do it, even for us? It is getting tougher, from our human perspective, to believe that Jesus will help us in our day. The world is just getting worse and life as a committed Christian believer and family, even a man and woman living within the blessing of a Christian marriage, all seems impossible today. Our heads are down because we feel alone.

Lift up your heads! Look with eyes of faith that trust in the mighty works of our Lord Jesus Christ. Receive the everlasting joy upon your heads, as Isaiah predicted. He who healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, raised the dead, gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf—He it is who has come into your midst right here this very day. You have heard His Word of forgiveness before, and you have it as your very own gift once again today. You couldn't lift up your own head, for all of the sin, pain and death in your life that had kept it down. But He raises up your head, since He bowed down His own head in death on the cross for your forgiveness and eternal life. He gave up His Spirit in utter agony and shame so that you would breathe in the blessings of your lasting inheritance in His kingdom. He lifted up His head again to new physical life on the third day so that resurrection for your physical body would be certain at His glorious return. Your weak knees will be strengthened, as Isaiah sings, you of anxious heart-- "Be strong" in the strength of the Lord and not in your own strength. You are now known as the ransomed ones, belonging to the Lord forever. He has come through

for you to restore what sin and its curse had taken away. Your head is raised up with confident faith, since the Blood of Christ your Savior was shed on the cross to pay for your release, and to ease all of your hurt.

Rejoice, rejoice! so we hear in the hymn on this Third Sunday in Advent, our color lightens from hopeful patient waiting to a more joyful, here and now hue, and we light the pink candle on our Advent wreath at church and at home. And you know that this is more than simply to put out an effort to “remember the reason for the Season,” as important as that is. A happy stream of mere thoughts on how I can bring peace on earth, would not do that much good for John the Baptist, as he’s locked up in prison. They don’t seem to last that long for you or me, either. You need something bigger, deeper: and you have it-- the flesh and blood forgiveness that Jesus gives you today. That’s the only joy that lasts. You are here for the mighty works of God that happen in front of your face, and give you a reason truly to rejoice. No one else, including yourself, can replace the joy that Christ our Lord came to bring, and we look forward with repentant joy to that Great Day when our heads will be lifted up in everlasting glory, never to be bowed down in sorrow again.

In the Name of the Father and of the **☩** Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.