

Readings for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

FIRST READING: *Isaiah 49:3, 5-6*

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

The LORD said to me: You are my servant, Israel, through whom I show my glory. Now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; and I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! It is too little, the LORD says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: *Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10* ***Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will.***

I have waited, waited for the LORD, and he stooped toward me and heard my cry. And he put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God.

Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will.

Sacrifice or offering you wished not, but ears open to obedience you gave me. Holocausts or sin-offerings you sought not; then said I, "Behold I come."

Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will.

"In the written scroll it is prescribed for me, to do your will, O my God, is my delight, And your law is within my heart!" I announced your justice in the vast assembly; I did not restrain my lips, as you, O LORD, know.

Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will.

SECOND READING: *Corinthians 1:1-3*

A reading from the beginning of the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: *John 1:29-34*

+A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel." John testified further, saying, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and remain upon him. I did not

know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah the prophet began this passage with the promise of comfort, comfort from God. Just how this promise unfolded in the lives of God's people is unclear. Since he's offered the promise to us as well, how the promise is unfolding right now is also unclear. I suspect that Isaiah is not offering comfort food. Perhaps the promise is as simple as knowing the presence of God in the experiences of our day. There are two things in the reading that lead me to that statement. He described a straight highway in the wilderness for our God. To me a highway is an interstate road that is intended to provide direct and swift transport from one place to another. Being bound to that image can get in the way of what Isaiah means.

I had a classmate, who sadly died several years ago. His name was Greg Schwartz. He was one of the first of my friends to have a car. He would go out of his way to take certain roadways. He loved to drive on Forest Preserve Drive, the Lake Shore Drive, the Damen Avenue Overpass between Diversey and Fullerton Avenues and the Edens Expressway. Some may call these thoroughfares the scenic, cultural route. We called them Schwartz cuts. Today, fifty years later, I remember my old friend fondly when I use those routes.

Highways, in Isaiah's time, were not just quick and safer roads to travel; they were also built on high ground. When one is on high ground, one can see farther. That provided good vistas to enjoy the scenery as one traveled. Sight seeing has been a human pastime for eons. High ground also provided a view of possible threats, washouts, enemies or robbers. They were regularly patrolled by soldiers or police to provide protection from being attacked. People traveled mainly on foot and in groups. This provided some means of protection and also allowed more hands and backs to carry food and water. Still, highways may or may not have been paved. The later Romans built good roadways throughout their empire and they still exist. Some are still in use.

People need to travel, but does God? Isaiah wrote that the highway was for God. Since God is everywhere, why would God need to travel? Why the wilderness? Why does Isaiah promise significant terraforming? I like to see mountains. High mountains were thought to be places where God lived; Mount Sinai, the Temple Mount and Mount Gerizim for example. I've been to the Grand Canyon several times and on several mountain tops; they are beautiful and sometimes, literally, breath taking places. Why would God want to destroy such wonders of creation? Taken at face value, the images don't make much sense. These places have symbolic meaning. As hard as it is to level mountains and fill the Grand Canyon, it is even harder to change human behavior. It is the heart of people that God seeks. God seeks to transform people, not the land.

The second is the context for the Scripture. The book of Isaiah had several authors. Chapters one through thirty nine were written by the historical Isaiah in the time before the Exile. Chapters forty through fifty five were written by an anonymous author named second or Deutero-Isaiah. This reflected the Jewish community in Diaspora. Chapters fifty six through sixty six were written by another anonymous author named third or Trito-Isaiah. These chapters dealt with the return of the Remnant to the Promised Land. Each section of the book has different style, content and time period. Our reading today is the beginning of Deutero-Isaiah.

God's people are in exile, separated from homeland, temple and kinfolk. They are scattered throughout the empires of Assyria and Babylon. Perhaps, as captives, some were slaves and prisoners. They are foreigners living among pagans. Even in their living situation as they lived outside of the Promised Land

and without king and temple, they carried with them their God. Their worship in their new homes had to change. They still worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their prayer, ritual and custom were mainstays of their faith. This was the context of the life of Isaiah and the rest of God's people. God's comfort came to them in their new lands in new languages.

The wilderness was not a place; it was God's faithful who lived with those who did not know God. It wasn't an isolated location that Isaiah celebrated it was the lived experience of being isolated by exile and Diaspora. Yet they still experienced God's presence with them. The highway was the perspective of their faith; God filled them still. People saw their lives as being changed and led by God; God's hand altered their lives drastically. Isaiah's metaphors of building projects and terraforming were unthinkable in his day. In ours, we have the technology to do these unthinkable things. They spoke to the heart of a people separated from much of what they knew and loved. There cultural isolation did not isolate them from God; God rushed directly upon them; there were no bounds to God.

This year, I was captivated by this passage given the conditions of 2020. Some of our current living situation has deep roots in the experience of exile and isolation. God can still rush upon us like he did for the Ancient Hebrews. We shelter in place, apart from those we love. We cannot gather as we did. Vice president Al Gore spoke of another kind of highway, the Information Superhighway. Because of this technology, we do have means of communication the ancients did not have; phones and the internet. These may be poor substitutes for face-to-face interaction but they work. God lives with us always.

The wilderness has another meaning; a place of solitude. Jesus would go to pray in isolated places. He fed the multitudes in deserted places. Moses encountered God in the wilderness. Moses experienced God in the Burning Bush alone. Being alone may lead to loneliness. It can also lead to solitude. In solitude, prayer is possible. Prayer can occur in community as we worship with Jesus in our midst. Most of the time, we pray on our own and by ourselves. With Jesus, we are never alone. All that has to happen is to remember that Jesus is near. In serendipity our thoughts can turn to him. Solitude is a state of mind. Wilderness is a place. Both can provide the moment to experience God.

These days one day can seem like another. Fortunately, during these past months, I have become confused as the day of the week only a couple three times. I woke up last Monday morning to realize that it was actually Sunday. With my reading of Second Peter, I wonder if he and God could be so confused. The name that God gave, while meeting Moses, I AM, reflects timelessness. God never was, never will be but always is. God is NOW. We all have pasts, we may all have futures, but we always live in the NOW too. My past has gotten longer and longer as I have aged while at the same time my future gets shorter and shorter, but I live in the present. God is near me now.

The Second Letter of Peter probably was not the Peter who is now a saint. Scholars, from the tone and themes of this letter, hold that it is the latest of all New Testament documents. Earlier, the Church believed that Jesus' return was immanent. Second Peter may have been written as late as 130 of the Common Era. Peter died during the reign of Nero in the mid 60s. The believers who expected Jesus' return had to come to grips with what was becoming more evident. Jesus' coming is delayed. His return was and is coming, but not yet. The notion of a thousand years for God being like a day became the way for the Church to cope and change. We await Jesus return, but few of us expect it soon or in our lifetime. Today our expectation of the Kingdom of God reflects two thousand years of delay. We deal here with God's time, not ours. We live and work by the clock; God, as the eternal NOW, does not. God is beyond time. This letter encourages believers to embrace the wait and live life.

I don't know how many remember or have seen Franco Zeffirelli's, "Jesus of Nazareth." Michael York played John the Baptist in it. When I read the gospel stories about the Baptist it is his wild-eyed performance and dress I see. However there are two kinds of camel hair clothes; there are two kinds of a camel's hair. There's the outer guard hair. It is coarse and stiff. When woven, it becomes hair-cloth. One would make what we call sack-cloth or a hair shirt. That's what we'd expect a hermit-holy man to be wearing; a sign of his desire and need to repent of sin. I had a camelhair blazer that I wore in high school. My parents bought it for me at Robert Hall, of happy memory. It was the softest blazer I ever

wore. Camelhair wool comes from the camel's undercoat. Whereas the guard hair protects the camel's skin from abrasion, the camel's undercoat keeps it warm. My camelhair blazer kept me warm too.

The purpose of this digression was simple. Perhaps the image of St. John in a hair shirt may not be entirely accurate. As he lived as a hermit in the wilderness, wouldn't he have to keep warm? It does get cold, at least at night and in winter in the deserts of Palestine. John may have been clad in a soft, woolen set of clothes. Eating locusts has never appealed to me. Each time the seventeen year locusts have returned, there have been cooking shows that presented locust recipes. Sautéed in oil with some garlic and seasoning, people described their flavor as pretty good. They are, at least, high in protein. I've had honey from the comb. Eastern Mediterranean people serve a dessert of yogurt, nuts and honey. I like that very much. Perhaps the wild-eyed, rough-clad, bug eating and bee-stung image is inaccurate. John's image is not the important part of this story. It is his message and actions that have significance.

John's location, appearance, message and diet reflect the tradition of the prophet Elijah. The book of Malachi prophesies that the return of Elijah marks the Messianic Age when God's anointed would come. Part of the Jewish Seder meal ritual, at Passover, has an empty seat at table set for an anticipated guest. The seat is for the prophet Elijah. In this passage, John the Baptist announced the coming of another, more worthy one. He acted as Elijah and announced the Messiah, Jesus.

John was a powerful preacher with a powerful message; that is evident. However, power alone may not have been enough. For John to attract such large and diverse crowds and for people to travel so far to the wilderness, John had to be an attractive personality with an attractive message. What did people go to see? What did they go to hear? He proclaimed forgiveness of sin. The human condition has not altered very much over history. We are all sinners who need God's forgiveness. This is what John offered to people. They, like we seek, sought out God's forgiveness. The sign of which was a soak in the Jordan River. In the Jordan their sins were washed away. The river's current carried them into the sea. Ritual baths in Judaism are common. Cleanliness is next to godliness, as a saying has its roots in the Old Testament. The rites of initiation into Judaism by Gentiles consist of a series of ritual baths that can be called baptisms. They haven't changed very much since the time of Jesus. We, as Christians have adapted a Jewish ritual bath into the Sacrament of Baptism. John gave a message that helped the lives of people. They came burdened by the guilt of sin. They left, forgiven, having received a bath.

As he predicted the coming of Jesus, John made a statement of his unworthiness. One mightier would come who would offer the Holy Spirit in Baptism. In the gospel of Mark, John never named who this would be. The Jews of that time and many Jews today anticipate God's promised Messiah. In John's proclamation, he implied that the Messiah would come. John is subtle with his teaser. John has cleverly planted a seed of expectation in the crowds that came to receive his message. Jesus would become his successor, and more; the savior of the human race.

Isaiah offered comfort through the presence of God in the lives of God's people in exile. Peter urges believers in Jesus to give Christian Witness as they live and embrace what may come. In Mark, the ways are made straight for Jesus. He has already entered the world and is on his way into the lives of God's people. These are gifts offered to people long dead and now offered to us.

May the presence of God remain the means by which we keep one another safe.

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