

December 4, 2022
2nd Sunday of Advent
Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: "A voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Background:

This is the second week of the new church year and the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is preparation for the arrival of an important person. You may think of your school being prepared for a visit from the central office, or from a religious superior of the sponsoring religious community. Perhaps more current would be a representative from a grant foundation to which you have applied for assistance. You can make your own comparisons, but what is being heralded is the coming of someone of importance, and it merits everyone's awareness and preparation.

In today's gospel it is John the Baptist who calls us to prepare for the arrival of the one whom John is not worthy to even carry his sandals. Matthew's description of John is much different than what is found in Luke's gospel. Luke chooses to focus on the common family (that Jesus and John are related cousins), while still making sure his audience recognizes that Jesus is the more significant of the two. Matthew focuses more on John as a prophet, a person in the line of prophets of the Hebrew people who tried to help the people to see God working in their midst. Thus, John is described as dressing in camel hair with a leather belt and eating locusts and wild honey, things that link him to prophets of old like Samson, Samuel, or Elijah, who also spoke of resistance to injustice and looked for social reform.

John is reminding the people to prepare for the coming of Jesus with his particular expectation. Jesus is one whom John is not worthy to even carry his sandals, and he is one who clears the threshing floor and gathers the wheat into his barn. John is asking for the people to prepare themselves for his arrival, but also to be instruments of preparation. The repentance he seeks is more than personal, but social transformation that leads to just relationships being lived throughout the society. In order to emphasize the connection between repentance and changing one's life, John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers," understood as offspring of snakes. The Pharisees drew importance on maintaining their ancestral heritage by faithfully keeping religious traditions. To call them offspring of snakes would admonish their "show" of repentance without the "good fruit as evidence of your repentance."

At that time there was great unrest with authority, both civil and religious. Rome and the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem exploited the common person by not confronting the systems that kept most people in need of even the basic necessities for life. Ancestral property was confiscated, and taxes were unaffordably high. The social

climate was one of unrest and desire for change. Many gave in to grumbling and complaining. Others looked for the Messiah, someone from the outside, to bring about the changes for which they longed. Instead of giving in to grumbling and complaining, John preached repentance in order to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. But John looked for a Messiah who would come with power to change the world order of the day. "I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I." (Matthew 3:11)

The gospel text that the Church has chosen for this second Sunday of Advent presents a challenge to use this time of Advent not just to prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, but also the total life, mission, and lived reality of the Kingdom of God that Jesus' birth inaugurated. It calls the church to look beyond individual transformation to changes in society and our institutions that are needed, and to ask what part we might be asked to play in what is needed in our culture and society. Or perhaps, how are we resistant to the kind of changes that need to take place for others to live with the dignity that is theirs as God's daughters and sons?

Reflection Questions:

1. When you think about Advent being a time of preparation for an arrival, is there a memory you have of preparing for the arrival of a person, a relative, an exchange student, or a supervisor that comes to mind?
2. What were some of the feelings that arose within you during that period? What are some of the ways those feelings got expressed?
3. How does today's gospel fit with the way you have been thinking about the coming of Christmas?
4. What comes to mind as you hear Matthew describing John as being in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey, and preaching repentance?
5. What are some of the things that arise in you as you hear John's message in today's gospel?
6. By coming out to be baptized, people were publicly admitting their faults. Has there ever been a time when you were willing to admit your failure, or maybe even needed to admit those failures?
7. What impact does that willingness have on your life and the lives of others?
8. Can you take some time to talk with God about your desire to use this time before Christmas as a time for preparation for the arrival of God and God's reign, or some other hope for God's lived presence in your life or society?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fsccll-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for December 4, 2022, the Second Sunday of Advent

On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, a bud shall blossom.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and understanding,

a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord.
Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay, but he shall judge with justice, and decide aright.
Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.
The baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.
There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.
On that day, the root of Jesse, set up for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out.

*Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.
O God, with your judgment endow the king, and with your justice, the king's son;
he shall govern your people with justice and your afflicted ones with judgment.
Justice shall flower in his days, and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.
For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out, and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
May his name be blessed forever; as long as the sun his name shall remain.
In him shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed; all the nations shall proclaim his happiness.*

Brothers and sisters: Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction,
that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.
May you think in harmony with one another and Christ Jesus, that you may with one voice glorify God.
Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God.
For Christ became a minister to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs,
and so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.
As it is written: I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name.

John the Baptist appeared in the desert saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"
It was of him that Isaiah had spoken when he said:
A voice of one crying out in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.
John wore clothing made of camel's hair, and his food was locusts and wild honey.
At that time, all Judea were going out to be baptized by him in the Jordan River.
When he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said, "You brood of vipers!
Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.
And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'
For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.
Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.
I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I.
I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will gather his wheat, but the chaff he will burn with fire."

Excerpts from Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17; Romans 15:4-9; and Matthew 3:1-12

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for December 4th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel from Matthew is about John the Baptist: preaching repentance in the desert, baptizing people in the Jordan, and challenging the Pharisees and Sadducees to "Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down." This gospel relates the Baptist's ministry to a passage from Isaiah chapter 40: "A voice cries out in the desert, 'prepare the way of the Lord.'"

The other readings also have references to anticipating the coming of the Lord, and that with him will come abundant justice and peace. In the first reading, again from Isaiah, a long passage from the beginning of chapter 11 refers to one who is to come, a descendant of Jesse: "The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him. He shall judge with justice." It tells how times will change after his judgement: Wolves will be companions with lambs, leopards with kids, lions with calves, bears with cows, cobras with babies. "There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea." Psalm 72 exults, "Justice shall flower in his days, and profound peace, till the moon be no more." In the second reading, from the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "By endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May God grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus."

There is an updated additional attachment this week. It is a one-page calendar for Advent with scripture references from the Sunday readings throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons. Pairing related Old Testament and New Testament verses, every selection has a reference to Light from the bible. It is a unique perspective on the Advent and Christmas story, with a focus on Light in the scriptures. Feel free to print it, use it, and share it if you want!

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!