

December 10, 2023
Second Sunday of Advent
Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"

John the Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Background:

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark's Gospel does not begin with a genealogy. A genealogy was one way to explain why this son of a carpenter from the small town of Nazareth was worthy of a proclamation, a Gospel. In Jesus' day, a proclamation was about the birth of a royal son or a military victory. Mark's first verse, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," is a proclamation that would have left the people of the day asking, "Who is this Jesus Christ?" They would also understand the phrase "son of" to mean, "Having the qualities of." This proclamation is announcing that this Jesus Christ has the qualities of God and therefore, his birth must be proclaimed.

After the proclamation, Mark quotes the great prophet Isaiah, and he also draws on and reworks the prophet Malachi: "Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me... And suddenly there will come to the temple the LORD whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day..." (Malachi 3:1, 23). Using the prophets Isaiah and Malachi, Mark introduces John as the one who prepares for the coming of Jesus. When the people of Israel were freed from Egyptian slavery, they were first led by God into the desert before they entered the promised land. This exodus experience became the model of liberation and encounter with God by which the Jews understand God working in and throughout their history. Mark draws on this understanding in presenting John the Baptist, the one in the desert who was preparing the way for one who has the qualities of God.

Unlike the Essenes, who practiced a ritual of washing that was meant only for those of their community, John's baptism was for everyone. John proclaimed a message that was a call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and the coming of one mightier than himself. It was very possible that he was thinking more in terms of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the final reign of God. The great response to John indicates the people's spiritual hunger. They may have gone to see the man who was clothed in camel hair and ate locusts. But they responded to his message by being baptized and by committing to making changes in their own lives. They were committing themselves to live a more faithful relationship with God.

Most peasants of day lived their daily life with an enormous burden of debt. The approaching "day of the Lord," with its judgment and a time when all debts would be forgiven, would have been appealing. Unlike the Essenes, who became an isolated ascetical desert community who also waited for the day of the Lord, John's message was focused on people returning to their families and their communities with a renewed dedication to their relationship with God.

Reflection Questions:

1. How do the events in our world and in your personal life affect your willingness to look for God's working in the world and in your own life?
2. Can you recall other times of waiting in your life? (Waiting for a birth, whether you have been hired, waiting through a health issue...) What is your awareness of yourself in periods of waiting? Is the waiting that is asked of you this Advent different in some ways? Is it similar in other ways?
3. If you could ask God to show God's presence in your life or in the world in some way, what would be your request? What would it be like for you to pray this Advent with that kind of desire?
4. Can your desire be God's way of asking you to be part of God's reign in the world?
5. Who are the people in your life who are deeply rooted in hope?
6. Why was John's call to repentance and forgiveness so powerful for the people of the day?
7. Can you talk openly and honestly about your own desire for God's presence in your life and in the world? What would that concretely mean for you and how you live?

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://fscs-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 10, 2023, the Second Sunday of Advent

Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated; indeed, she has received double for all her sins. A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain made low; the rough country shall be made a broad valley. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all shall see it together; the Lord has spoken. Go up a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; cry out, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.

Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.
I will hear what God proclaims—for he proclaims peace to his people.
Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him, glory dwelling in our land.
Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss.
Truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven.
The Lord himself will give his benefits; our land shall yield its increase.
Justice shall walk before him, and prepare the way of his steps.

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard "delay," but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out. Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God. But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace.

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Excerpts from Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85:9-14; 2 Peter 3:8-14; and Mark 1:1-8

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for December 10th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. On this second Sunday of Advent, the Gospel is from the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. It tells of John the Baptist, characterizing him as the messenger that Isaiah wrote of in the Scriptures, "crying out, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" John proclaimed a baptism of repentance, and he further proclaimed, "One mightier than I is coming after me."

The other readings also have references to preparation and repentance, and God's nearness, and his coming. The first reading from Isaiah is the one quoted by Mark, referring to the "voice crying out in the desert...," and also comforting the people, "Here comes with power the Lord God; like a shepherd he feeds his flock and gathers the lambs." Psalm 85 proclaims, "Near indeed is his salvation. Justice shall walk before him, and prepare the way of his steps." In the second reading, from his second letter, Peter writes, "All should come to repentance, waiting for the coming of the day of God."

Last week, on the first Sunday of Advent, the season that prepares us to celebrate the birth of Jesus opened with a Gospel that had nothing to do with Jesus' infancy. Instead, that Gospel described the adult Jesus, toward the end of his ministry, instructing his disciples and us to be prepared for his coming a second time. He tells his disciples that when he returns, it will be at an unknown moment, an unknown year and day, and an unknown time. This week, Mark's Gospel starts with a concise introduction of the adult John the Baptist; it does not relate any infancy or childhood story of Jesus. It is after this text that Jesus gets brought into Mark's Gospel narrative, just before the start of his ministry. It is as if we are being prepared, for the birth we are going to celebrate, by first establishing first how great a person this yet unborn infant will become. The pre-infancy narratives and the Bethlehem babe-in-a-manger-type details are still yet to come; that will happen closer to the date when we celebrate the birth.

Joe

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