

December 6, 2020
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 carpenter from a small town of Nazareth is 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 says, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The people of the day would ask, "Who is this Jesus Christ?" They would also understand the phrase "son of" to mean "having the qualities of." So, this opening statement is proclaiming that Jesus has the qualities of God, and therefore, his birth and his story 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 Isaiah's and Malachi's prophecy arc introduces John as the one who prepares the way 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 becomes 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 is for everyone. John proclaims a message of a call to repentance or the forgiveness of sin, and the coming of one mightier than himself. It is very possible that he was thinking more in terms of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the final reign of God. The extent to which people respond to John indicates their spiritual hunger. They may have gone out just 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 lives. They were committing themselves to living a more faithful relationship with God. Most peasants of the 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 to most. 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 who were returning to their families and their communities with a renewed dedication to their relationship with God.

Reflection Questions:

1. How do things like the pandemic and other events of world affect your readiness to begin to look for God's working in a new year?
2. What is your awareness of yourself during periods of waiting? Is the waiting that is asked of you this Advent different in some ways? How is it different? How is it similar?
3. Who are the people in your own life who have called you to look more deeply at your relationship with God?
4. Where do you experience hope this year?
5. Who are the people you know, or know of, 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 for how you would like to be part of God's reign in the coming year?

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://fscclalledtobe.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 6, 2020, 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

From our editor, Joe Thiel:

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for December 6th (the Second Sunday of Advent), as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel for this week is the first eight verses of the Gospel of Mark. After referencing a corresponding passage from Isaiah, the gospel starts by introducing John the Baptist. John proclaims, "One mightier than I is coming! He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The first reading from Isaiah is the passage referenced in the gospel. "A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Herald of glad tidings, cry out, Here is your God!" Psalm 85 affirms, "Near indeed is his salvation, glory dwelling in our land." In the second reading, from the Second Letter of Peter, he writes, "With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years. He does not delay his promise; he is patient, wishing that all should come to repentance. The day of the Lord will come."

Joe