

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Luke 3:4, 6

R: Alleluia, alleluia.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths:

all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

R: Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mark 1:1-8; L5B

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.”

Reflecting on the Gospel

The church gives us the opening verses of Mark’s gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent. As a lion, Mark pounces on his subject matter. A one-line intro is followed by a mishmash of Scripture quotes attributed to Isaiah. In actuality, Mark combines Malachi 3:1a with Isaiah 40:3 and applies both to the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist. It’s as though Mark doesn’t have the time for precise details. He charges in. This is why Mark is often portrayed as a lion.



With John the Baptist’s unkempt appearance and fiery, apocalyptic preaching, he gathered crowds of those acknowledging their sins and seeking forgiveness. In the first of perhaps many theological quandaries created by the presence of John the Baptist, he proclaimed a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The problem is created when Jesus comes forward to be baptized. Of course, for modern Christians (and even some ancient Christians) the question naturally arises, why would Jesus need to be baptized as he is without sin? Such questions seem to be beyond the scope of Mark’s quick narrative. They are left for others like Luke and Matthew to address, each in his own way. In the Gospel of John of course there is simply no baptism of Jesus at all, but only John the Baptist testifying to Jesus.

But in the Gospel of Mark, the first canonical gospel written, the reader is carried forward swiftly. John the Baptist proclaims, “One mightier than I is coming after me.” This person will baptize with the Holy Spirit. In these short verses the stage is set for Jesus. Mark has no infancy narrative such as Matthew or Luke would have it. There is no dramatic, cosmic prologue attuned to the opening words of Genesis as the Gospel of John would have it. Instead, Mark charges in, immediately quoting Scripture before introducing John the Baptist. We readers are swept up in the story.

Perhaps it is appropriate that we read these opening verses on the Second Sunday of Advent with our busy lives, shopping lists, and details to which we must attend. The gospel, and especially its opening, seems to lend itself to our frenetic pace. Still there is the proclamation that something, someone, is coming. He is mightier than John the Baptist, mightier than our concerns for the season, mightier than our lists of things to get done. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and our lives will never be the same.

Living the Paschal Mystery

It’s cliché now to talk about how busy the Christmas season is. Still, each year it approaches us as though we had no idea it was coming. Instead, the image of a pregnant mother is appropriate. Ready or not, the baby is coming! Those weeks or days immediately prior to the birth are spent “nesting,” making last-minute preparations for the new life that will be in our midst. Once here, our lives are never the same. A child changes us.

The same is the case with Christmas. The infant child Jesus will change our worlds. Though we have had time to ponder the meaning of this birth, the knowledge that it is at least two weeks away can also give us comfort. We have many things to attend to before that day. As we go about our Christmas rou-

tines, checking off lists, ensuring we have purchased just the right gifts, delivering food and presents, we are reminded that this child is coming. Ready or not.

Focusing the Gospel

Mark 1:1-8

John’s brief appearance in Mark’s gospel begins a new era in the history of salvation. Mark’s details about John’s appearance recall the austere dress of the great prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8). Some of the Jews in Jesus’ time believed that Elijah would return from heaven to announce the long-awaited restoration of Israel as God’s kingdom. For Mark and Matthew, this expectation is fulfilled in John the Baptist. In the Baptist’s proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, the age of the prophets is fulfilled and the age of the Messiah begins. John’s baptism with water is an act of hope and expectation in the Messiah’s baptism in the very Spirit and life of God.

Focusing the First Reading

Isa 40:1-5, 9-11

Today’s first reading is the beginning of the second section of Isaiah, often called the “Book of Consolation.” The prophet (Deutero-Isaiah) is sent by God to announce to a broken people that their long night of exile at the hands of the Babylonians is at an end and that they will soon begin the journey home and the hard work not only of rebuilding their nation but also restoring their covenant with God. But, the prophet assures them, God will be with them as their healer, protector, and “shepherd.” The gospel writers will invoke Isaiah’s image of the prophet/herald in their accounts of John the Baptist.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14

The exiles have returned to God’s city of Jerusalem and begin the hard work of rebuilding both their nation and identity as the people of God. The psalmist sings of the promise of a restored Israel, a people God brings home to Jerusalem. In Psalm 85, the singer imagines a new and thriving Israel, the kingdom of God, built on justice, kindness, truth, and mercy. God promises peace, the Old Testament ideal of shalom: not just the absence of conflict but a wholeness in relationships between God and his people, among neighbors, and with the land itself.

Focusing the Second Reading

2 Pet 3:8-14

In today’s second reading, the Second Letter of Peter echoes many of the Advent themes from last Sunday’s readings, especially the section from 1 Corinthians. Peter confronts the notion that somehow Christ’s return has been “delayed” (remember that the first generation of Christians expected that Christ’s return was imminent). This “delay” is a gift of time for repentance and reconciliation with God and one another. Treating time as a gift from God and our lives as experiences of grace marks our identity as an Advent people.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

Who are the “prophets” among us who proclaim the presence of God in our midst?

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How do we balance the gospel’s seeming opposing messages of warning and hope?

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What are the wastelands of our community and society that we can transform into a “highway” for God’s justice?

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How can we make the traditional and practical preparations for the coming Christmas holiday experiences of “grace”?

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