

# Sunday, December 6, 2020

## Second Sunday of Advent, Year B

### Introduction

John calls people to repent, to clear the decks, to completely reorder their lives so that nothing gets in the way of the Lord's coming. The reading from Isaiah gives the context for this radical call: the assurance of forgiveness that encourages us to repent; the promise that the coming one will be gentle with the little ones. Isaiah calls us all to be heralds with John, to lift up our voices fearlessly and say, "See, your God is coming!" We say it to one another in worship, in order to say it with our lives in a world in need of justice and peace.

### Isaiah 40:1-11

*In grand, flowing, poetic lines, the prophet announces that the exile of God's people in Babylon is over. God will deliver Israel and will care for her as a shepherd cares for the sheep. This word can be trusted, because the only enduring reality in life is the word of God.*

<sup>1</sup>Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.

<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup>A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.

<sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

<sup>6</sup>A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"  
All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

<sup>7</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.

<sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever.

<sup>9</sup>Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,

“Here is your God!”

<sup>10</sup>See, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.

<sup>11</sup>He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.

## Mark 1:1-8

*The Gospel of Mark does not begin with a story of Jesus' birth but with the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.*

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,  
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

## Sermon

### Preparing

*John perceives a call from God to prepare the way for the start of God's reign on earth, and acts on it*

Imagine,  
five or six hundred years before the birth of Jesus,  
that Judea is overrun by the Babylonian army.

The walls of the Holy City are finally breached.

The Temple of Solomon is looted and desecrated.

The nobles are taken as prisoners.

And the sons of the Jewish king are killed,  
just before their father's eyes are gouged out.

It is a cruel and hopeless age for God's Chosen Ones.

In time some of the exiles adjust to life in their new home.

A seminary for rabbis is established.

Much of what we call the Old Testament is set in its present form,  
after countless generations of oral tradition,  
for fear that no one would be left alive to tell the story.

Now imagine a school of Isaiah.

Disciples approach the prophet,  
who had warned them of these dark days.

So that after he dies  
one,  
and then another  
continue to preach and write in their master's name.

All about God's plan to bring empire to an end.

The original Isaiah,  
who is the author of the first 39 chapters of the book that bears his name,  
begs his people to recognise that suffering is on the horizon;  
that Babylon will take the city.

God seeks faith and justice.

But the people ignore him,  
until it is too late.

Third Isaiah preaches after Babylon itself has fallen to another more powerful enemy;  
enticing his people to make a long journey back home across a vast wilderness.

But today, we read from Second Isaiah,  
who is with his people in captivity,  
urging them to trust God,  
even though most could probably recite 100 reasons why not to.

Believing that the disaster occurred because the people had taken God for granted,  
this Isaiah announces that their penalty has been served.

Now they need a word of hope.

And a prophet.

Imagine further  
that centuries later John,  
who seems to have joined a sect which believed that city life is the cause of sin,  
receives a vision.

As he reads Second Isaiah  
he hears God calling him to action;  
for him to be the lone voice crying out in the wilderness.

He knew that people usually ignored or harassed the prophets.  
It was not a calling for the faint-hearted.

By this time  
Babylon,  
Persia,  
and Greece  
have all come and gone.

In John's day Rome holds his people captive,  
not by carting them away,  
but by controlling even the religious aspects of their lives  
and gathering exorbitant taxes that enriched people in far away places.

John believes that God hears his people  
when they cry out for relief.

And that relief often takes the form of a leader.

Perhaps, like people in a hundred other generations,  
John believes that God is going to use him to do a new thing.

So level those bumpy roads,  
straighten the curves,  
widen the shoulder.

God is soon going to pay us a visit.

But then the ridiculousness and vanity of it all strikes John,  
and leads him to realise that he may be just one of the schmucks on the roadcrew.

Someone else,  
more like a king is coming.

Someone impossible to really imagine.

Whose reign is to be unlike anything he and his people could get their heads around.

Where armies and a treasury  
give way to peace *and* justice.

When all the things human beings think they have figured out about God and power,  
give way to grace and love.

Even turning the other cheek,  
sharing a coat,  
loving enemies,  
and taking his throne on a rough-hewn cross.

This God, whom John, urges us to greet,  
is not just the latest "King of the Hill,"  
but something and someone else altogether.

Amen.

## Prayers of Intercession

**P** God of power and might, comfort your people and come quickly to this weary world. Hear our prayers for everyone in need.

*A brief silence.*

**A** Loving God, you set the stars in the sky and breathe life into the earth. Renew the face of creation where it is in need of your healing touch. Mend the wounds of environmental damage and restore balance to ecosystems so that all creation can declare your praise. Hear us, O God.

**C** **Your mercy is great.**

**A** Faithful God, you teach us to wait for you with faithfulness and patience. Sustain and support us in our doubts and questions. Nurture our faith as we discern and enact your mission. Hear us, O God.

**C** **Your mercy is great.**

**A** Steadfast God, you never tire of seeking justice. Where people suffer from discrimination, judgement, and injustice, speak words of truth and comfort. We pray especially for Chez Doris and Youth Stars. Lead us toward a world where faithfulness will sprout underfoot and righteousness rain down from above. Hear us, O God.

**C** **Your mercy is great.**

**A** Leading God, you ask us to make uneven ground smooth. Make even the disparities between your people. Sustain and support people with physical and intellectual disabilities. Accompany disability advocates who work for a world accessible to all. Teach us to celebrate the great diversity in our midst. Hear us, O God.

**C** **Your mercy is great.**

**A** Tender God, you know sorrow and joy alike. We pray for those in our families and congregation who are not joyful in this holiday season. Comfort those who grieve, be a companion to all who are lonely, tend those who are sick or struggling with depression, and gather all people in your healing embrace. Bring an end of COVID. Hear us, O God.

**C** **Your mercy is great.**

A Healing God, grant strength and skill to those who care for us in times of illness and injury. Through them, grant wholeness and peace to (names). Hear us, O God,

**C Your mercy is great.**

A Eternal God, we give thanks for the saints who have prepared your way in the wilderness and taught us to continue their faithful work. Make their generous lives an example for all. Hear us, O God.

**C Your mercy is great.**

A Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**C Amen.**

## Offering Prayer

A Generous God,  
you have created all that is,  
and you provide for us in every season.  
Bless all that we offer,  
that through these gifts the world will receive your blessing.  
In the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, we pray.

**C Amen.**

## Blessing

P The Creator of the stars bless your Advent waiting,  
the long-expected Saviour fill you with love,  
the unexpected Spirit guide your journey,  
✝ now and forever.

**C Amen.**

## Dismissal

A Go in peace.  
Prepare the way of the Lord.

**C Thanks be to God.**

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## Upcoming Commemorations

**Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, died around 342**

**Sunday, December 6, 2020**

Little is known about Nicholas, except that he was a bishop in present-day Turkey. According to legend, he was famous for his giving to the poor, and so has become a symbol of anonymous gift-giving.

**Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, died 397**

**Monday, December 7, 2020**

While a governor of northern Italy, Ambrose was elected bishop of Milan on the same day he was baptized. He was a famous preacher, a writer of hymns we still sing today, and helped lead St. Augustine to faith.