

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2022**

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 11:1-10	A descendant of David will bring salvation.
Psalms 72:1-17	The Anointed King will rule all creation.
Romans 15:4-9	Grace for the circumcised is now available to all.
Matthew 3:1-12	The wild one, the Baptist, calls all to conversion.

Matthew:

The reign of God in Jesus Christ does not have the same characteristics as the reign of some earthly potentate or ruler. These would assert their power with a show of force to make sure that no one doubts who is in charge. God inaugurates the divine reign by sending Jesus of Nazareth, born among the poor, a gentle teacher, one who would lay down his life for the salvation of all. God does things differently.

God invites and does not coerce. God summons the hearts of people to faithfulness, to renewal, to peace and love. People need to participate in the work of salvation. It is not imposed upon them from outside themselves. They are invited to respond to the work of salvation already offered graciously and freely by God. God only asks for conversion. Now, conversion is not accomplished by just making a few surface changes to the externals of our lives. The Greek word for conversion is *metanoia*: “a complete turnabout!” We need to change directions, to reorient our lives at the very depth, from the inside. We must turn around and go in the opposite direction from where we had been heading. But, it is a change that we must choose and choose deliberately and willingly.

It is true that God does send a rather convincing messenger to call us to that *metanoia*: John the Baptist, the wild man of the Judean desert! He hasn’t washed or had a haircut since he was 12 years old! He wears the only kind of garment that will stay on his frail body and fully absorb its sweats and oils and its odors: a garment made of camel hair, held in place by a leather belt. This garment identifies him as a prophet (See Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8). Locusts and wild honey identify him with Israel’s initial conversion experience: the 40 spent in the desert on the way to the Land of Promise. The contrasts between “locusts” and “honey” indicate both the cleansing destruction of God’s power and the saving sustenance of God’s love. In John, we find God at work with both power and tenderness.

Matthew is writing a Gospel for a Church community that needs to be convinced that its new identity is truly authentic, that it really comes from God. Being Jewish Christians, for the most part, they need to be reassured that after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, God is still in the midst of those whom God loves. They have to begin seeing themselves as the new Israel of God. Now that the traditional institutions of the Jewish people have been wiped out, this assembly gathered in the Spirit of Jesus Christ needs signs of its connection with the Israel of old. Founded on Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of all that was promised to Israel, the Church now must cling to this new image, this new sign of God’s love for the world. All during this liturgical year, we will be hearing the Gospel according to Matthew in which those early Christians, coming out of Judaism, struggle to find their identity in continuity with the traditions of ancient Israel made complete in Jesus, the Anointed One of God.

Isaiah:

The message from Isaiah is that a *branch*, a new shoot, will spring up from the stump and root from which King David came (Jesse being the father of King David). We have all seen a new shoot coming from a rotted tree stump, a new branch coming right out of the ground where there is a root from a tree several yards away, particularly with willow or poplar trees. Even so, in the darkest days when the kingdom of David was about to collapse, Isaiah saw a day when One would arise from David's lineage to bring justice and peace to all peoples.

Romans:

There had always been a thread running through all of Jewish Scriptures that the Gentiles, too, would eventually be called to salvation, not just the Jews. Paul quotes from the three sections of the Hebrew Bible (The Law: Deuteronomy 32:43, The Prophets: Isaiah 11:10, and The Writings: Samuel 22:50 and Psalm 18:49 and 117:1) to show that God is fulfilling that promise now in Jesus Christ by bringing Gentiles into fellowship with Jews.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What evidence is there in your life that you are on the path of repentance? What changes have you had to make over the years to bring your life into harmony with the will of God? Has conversion been a continuing effort for you, always to be started over again? Are you disappointed in that? Isn't it normal that Christians should always be deepening their conversion to the Lord?
2. What are the signs that the Church as a whole and your parish community in particular (or your family or the prayer group you belong to) are on the path of conversion? Do you see evidence of repentance for corporate sinfulness in the words and deeds of the Church? Do you know that Pope Saint John Paul II asked the forgiveness of the Jewish people for all the crimes committed against them by Christian people down through the centuries? Is this a sign of repentance?
3. What signs of conversion to the will of God do you think would be appropriate for you and your family during this season? Can you think of a way by which you could give evidence of the sincerity of your ongoing conversion this year? What positive acts of love and charity might be worthy and beneficial as you anticipate the coming of the Christ again?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Consider making an examination of conscience in view of celebrating the sacrament of penance during Advent. Meditate on the "brood of vipers" expression from the mouth of John the Baptist. "Bear fruit that befits repentance," he said to the people. What positive actions can you undertake as a sign of repentance during this season?

PRAYER

**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God,
have mercy on me a sinner!**

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE:

Our God would be a cruel God indeed if, as some suppose, God had placed in our hearts a yearning for union with God, only to place so many obstacles in our path as to make it effectively impossible for us to be saved. There seems to be a kind of spirituality in the hearts of some Christians whereby they conceive of God as standing in our way as we struggle to do what is right and pleasing to God. It is as if we were pushing in one direction, toward God, and God was pushing against us, away from God. You get the impression, sometimes, that some conceive of God as opposed to our being saved -- at least as if God deliberately makes it difficult for us out of sheer delight in our struggling.

The authentic doctrine of the Church is that God desperately wants us to enjoy fellowship with God in the heavenly kingdom and that God has facilitated our coming to that fellowship by every means at God's disposal, including the sending of the only-begotten Son who gave his very life that we all might be saved. "God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never die (John 3:16)."

"God wants everyone to be saved and to know the whole truth, which is: **'There is only one God, and Jesus Christ is the only one who can bring us to God. Jesus was truly human, and he gave himself to rescue all of us. God showed us this at the right time'**" (1 Timothy 2:4-6).

We are assured that God will not allow the message of God's gracious love to be lost or to be so changed that it can no longer be known to human beings. In faithfulness to the Covenant renewed in Jesus Christ, God will always stand by the word given and the promises made by which we all have access to salvation. Divine revelation is safely and accurately transmitted by the ministry of the Church so that every person of every age has an opportunity to hear that word and to hope in God's promises. The responsibility for the transmission of that word of salvation, of course, has been entrusted to the community of disciples of Jesus Christ. Its effectiveness and availability will depend on our faithfulness.

(See: The Catechism #74)

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