

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
DECEMBER 10, 2023**

SCRIPTURES:

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 **God comes with power and gentleness.**
2 Peter 3:8-14 **We live godly lives and hasten the day of God's coming.**
Mark 1:1-8 **John comes as God's messenger. Another comes with fire!**

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the three Scripture passages given in the Lectionary for this weekend. Begin with the Gospel, since the other readings are always chosen in terms of the Gospel reading. (The second reading does not always have the same theme as the Gospel and the first reading. The first reading will be directly related to the Gospel in its content.) Repeat the Gospel reading. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the faith community and does not necessarily answer any questions that an individual may have. We simply ask, "What message does the Church (or this faith-sharing group or this family) need to hear?" We listen to the word with that question in mind.

Mark:

Mark introduces an entirely new form of literature: a *gospel*, meaning *good news*. Perhaps the most original of all the Christian Testament writers, Mark creates a new vehicle to carry the message of a uniquely new event: Jesus the Christ, Son of God. The word *gospel* was used in Greek by secular writers to mean the good news of the birth of a new emperor, for example. For Mark, the Good News is not merely *about* Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus the Christ *is* the Good News. The book consists of narratives and sayings. It is not merely a biography. It is a proclamation that this Jesus truly is the Son of God. So, the title of the book!

A messenger from God was expected to announce that the "end" was at hand. Something entirely new was to be introduced by God. Many in Israel truly believed that a divine intervention was about to occur. The community at Qumran surely thought so. Ritual baptisms were practiced there and by other Jews to signify a complete change in the direction of one's life. Converts from the Gentile world were ritually washed clean when they entered Judaism.

John the Baptist asserts that mere physical descent from Abraham is not enough to assure salvation. **People must repent.** Repentance means more than just being sorry for one's sins. It means a completely new way of living, a radical about turn, a transformation at the very core of one's existence. Since the recreating power of God is required for this profound transformation to take place, John speaks of baptism in the Holy Spirit. The bath of water given by humans will not reach deeply enough. "One greater than I" is a code expression for the intervention of God himself.

As Christians, we live in the present moment, convinced that God is to be found in the concrete experience of the here and now. We have no other time in which to lead a real life. The present is the *sacrament* that enables us to encounter the God of all creation. But we live in a present that has a past and will have a future. We recall the past out of which Christ first came among us, and we look forward to the future when the Risen One will come again in glory.

Isaiah:

Today's quotation is taken from the so-called Second Isaiah (Chapters 40-55), a section that is known as the Book of Consolation. It was written during the Babylonian Exile (c. 550 BCE) and promises God's power to restore Israel to its homeland. The message is about highway building, making straight and level the road that leads to Jerusalem. God himself is coming to travel that road. The highway will be God's own highway. The people will travel that road with God on their return home. The time of their exile is over; God will live among them again. Great comfort will ensue, along with joy and fearlessness. That is the "good news."

2 Peter:

The last to be written of all the books in the Christian Testament (c. 110-115 CE), 2 Peter claims the growing authority of the long-since deceased Peter (c. 64 CE) to resolve disputes in the Church. The Second Coming was being delayed. Why? Some were claiming there was no afterlife; some were claiming God had no power to punish or to reward. This author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, asserts that the reason Christ has not returned yet is to give sinners more time to repent. Just as God had allowed another thousand years to Adam after having said that he would die if he ate from the Forbidden Tree, so now, people have been given a respite so they can change their ways and return to God. The letter shares the view of both the Jews and the Stoics at the time: the world will end in a conflagration of fire. But this letter goes beyond that view: it hopes in a new heaven and a new earth. Christians are called to live good lives now so that Christ will not delay any longer.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. From what you know of the spiritual condition of the people to whom John addressed his message, do you see any similarities with the people of the world in which we live today? Do we, too, need the transforming hand of God to touch us for a renewal and a new life in the Spirit? What are some of our needs that only God can supply? What would repentance mean, concretely, for the people of this culture and this way of life in America?

2. Who are the "messengers" from God who are preparing the way of the Lord today? Are there any at all? What is their message? How can we tell they are truly speaking for God? Is the Church willing to hear those messengers today? Are the people of secular society inclined to hear God's messengers? Do you think that the New Age Movement might really be based on a

misguided thirst for spirituality? Why such an interest in angels among people with no particular religious background? Aren't angels really divine messengers in the first place?

3. What obstacles are there in our experience of the Church and its ministry that tend to obscure the face of Jesus and make us hesitate before we give ourselves over entirely to his care? Do you remember how Pope Saint John XXIII, 55 years ago, called for a renewal of the Church so that the “face of Jesus might be more clearly seen” in the lives of the Church’s members? Has anything happened to make it so in these 55 years? Are we now more overtly portraying the image of Christ without sinful distortions? How could we do better?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Select a small project of Christian service to the poor that your group might be able to accomplish before Christmas.

PRAYER

Let each person read one verse from Psalm 85, until the whole Psalm has been prayed.

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The Church teaches authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord who lives in its midst and continues to work through the various ministries of the Christian community. We call the teaching ministry of the Church the *magisterium*, a Latin word that means *the unit that does the teaching*. The Church assumes a magisterial role whenever it teaches what God has revealed to the world.

Magisterium is exercised in various ways and with varying degrees of solemnity. Every family passing on the faith it has received from the previous generation engages in *magisterium*. The catechists in the parish, those who share faith with the catechumens, those who bring the word of God to the sick and the homebound along with the eucharistic bread, all these are working in the ministry of *teaching*. The bishop, priest, and deacon in the homily after the Gospel proclamation are exercising *magisterium* in the Church. Theologians, too, are part of the *magisterium* when, in faithfulness to the Church and to its doctrine, they explore the inner meaning of divine revelation and seek to articulate it to a changing world and an evolving culture.

There is a more solemn expression of *magisterium* when the bishops of the Church, in union with the Bishop of Rome, pronounce a teaching to be held by all the faithful; or when the pope alone, in moral union with the body of the world’s bishops, gives a definition of beliefs concerning divine faith or moral guidance meant for the whole Church. On certain occasions and concerning some especially crucial topics, this *magisterium* is called *Extra-Ordinary* and is referred to as *infallible*.

The whole Church as teacher of divine truth rests its claims to that ministry “on the charge given it by Christ: “Go into the whole world and teach the Good News. ... And I will be with you until the end of the world.” Christ continues a living ministry of teaching the Gospel

through the ministry of the Church which is his body on earth. Christ speaks the words of salvation to our times through the words which we utter in his name.

“He who hears you hears me.” The prophetic voice of the Church must ring out today with faithfulness to the message of the Gospel. The forms of thought and the words need to be framed in the idioms of contemporary culture in order to be understood by the people of our times. New words can be found for old truths.

How can the Church be silent in the face of human hunger for truth, for hope, for the consolation of the love of God?

See: The Catechism: #888-92; 2033,2049-50; 2034,2039

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