

2 Advent Year B Readings and Commentary

Commentary By Dale J. Sieverding: Mark's Gospel is composed using a course style of Greek. The evangelist tends to use an economy of words. Some scholars have caricatured Mark's Gospel as a passion narrative with an extended introduction. During the course of our reading of Mark's Gospel throughout Year B of the lectionary cycle, we will be confronted numerous times with foreshadowing of the Passion and crucifixion of Jesus. Today's Scripture plunges us into the story of Jesus by presenting the itinerant preaching of John the Baptist. In Mark's Gospel, John has the sole function of pointing to Jesus as the one "mightier than I." John's clothes and food recalls the Jewish Scriptures' story of Elijah sent by God to "prepare the way of the Lord."

Throughout Mark's Gospel, the disciples are presented as deaf and blind at times to the reality of who Jesus is and the import of Jesus' ministry and preaching. John however, is presented as a faithful disciple who recognizes and points to the person of Jesus who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The passage of Isaiah proclaimed today and immortalized in Handel's Messiah, sets the stage for how we are to hear the story of John the Baptist in the Gospel. The Lord comes with power, rules with strength and shall be like a shepherd who cares for his flock. The hieratic language of a "mighty God" is tempered with the gentle image of a shepherd and sheep.

The selection from Second Peter hearkens to the end times that the Christians expected without delay. The image of the "day of the Lord" coming like a thief and the whole world passing away, model the eschatological themes presented in last Sunday's Scriptures. The three selections together this Sunday proclaim a message of watchfulness and preparedness that needs to be part of our lives as we ready our hearts to celebrate the nativity of the Lord.

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First Reading Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

Prepare the way of the Lord.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

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 from the hand of the LORD
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:
In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!
Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill shall be made low;

the rugged land shall be made a plain,
the rough country, a broad valley.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Go up on to a high mountain,
Zion, herald of glad tidings;
cry out at the top of your voice,
Jerusalem, herald of good news!
Fear not to cry out
and say to the cities of Judah:
Here is your God!
Here comes with power
the Lord GOD,
who rules by his strong arm;
here is his reward with him,
his recompense before 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.

The word of the Lord.

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 By Virginia Smith: Chapter 40 opens the section of the Book of Isaiah attributed to Deutero or Second Isaiah. Because it refers to the Babylonian Exile, it was clearly written late in the Sixth Century BCE. Remembering that the Exile was the low point in Israelite history, it's easy to see how welcome God's consolation would be. His people are tired, dispirited, demoralized. Now a glimmer of hope appears on the horizon. God has not abandoned them. It's like saying to a small child who has been made to stand in the corner, "There, there, dear. Everything will be all right. Mommy still loves you."

The first and third readings each weekend usually carry some kind of theme that connects them, however tenuously. Today, it could hardly be more obvious. Mark cites the same passage from Isaiah heard in the first reading and relates it to John the Baptist. That may be a little startling at first as John is rarely thought of as a dispenser of comfort. He's more the 'stay alert and repent' type we saw in last week's readings. However, the more familiar we become with God's word, the more we realize how many nuances it takes on, depending on the situation.

Essentially, Advent is a season of quiet anticipation (alert comfort, one could say). That aura of calm expectation is nearly impossible to maintain in a materialistic culture that frantically urges us to buy-buy-buy and hurry-hurry-hurry. Perhaps that makes it all the more important to consciously carve out a period each day or, at least, each week to prepare our own way of the Lord and make straight his paths.

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14

℟(8) Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

I will hear what God proclaims;
the LORD—for he proclaims peace to his people.
Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him,
glory dwelling in our land.

℟ Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

Kindness and truth shall meet;
justice and peace shall kiss.
Truth shall spring out of the earth,
and justice shall look down from heaven.

℟ Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

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.

℟ Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

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

By John Paul Heil: Main Theme: PEACE and JUSTICE complement one another as gifts of God.

The psalmist informs us of what he hears God proclaiming, namely, peace. The biblical concept of “peace” (shalom in Hebrew) carries much richer connotations than the way that we often use the term “peace” today. For us peace is frequently a mainly negative concept--the absence of war or conflict. The biblical concept of peace is much more positive. It expresses an overall experience of complete well-being and harmony that exists in one’s relationship both with God and one’s fellow human being. Peace thus means being rightly and justly related to God and one another. While we must ardently strive for such peace, it is ultimately a gift of God that is complemented by the gift of justice. There can be no peace without justice for all. This complementarity is indicated in our psalm by the beautiful expression, “justice and peace shall kiss.” The psalmist expresses our future hope that “truth shall spring out of the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven” as gifts of God. Indeed, it is God himself who “will give his benefits” and so “justice shall walk before him.” If we want peace, we must work for social justice for all peoples, both of which are ultimately gifts of God that we join the psalmist in hoping and praying for.

Second Reading 2 Peter 3:8-14

We await new heavens and a new earth.

A reading from the second Letter of Saint Peter

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,
because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames
and the elements melted by fire.

But according to his promise
we await new heavens and a new earth
in which righteousness dwells.

Therefore, beloved, since you await these things,
be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace.

The word of the Lord.

2 Peter 3:8-14 By Virginia Smith: The Second Letter of Peter is one of the Christian Scriptures' latest works, dating perhaps from the early Second Century CE. By this time, many Christians were anxiously awaiting Jesus' return and were becoming nervous at its perceived delay. One of the purposes of this short pseudonymous missive is to put those fears to rest. Peter, of course, is not the author (hence the term pseudonymous), having perished in the Roman persecution of the 60s. While the modern reader becomes very uneasy at the thought of writing under the name of another, it was relatively common and acceptable at this time. The practice was often adopted if the author didn't think his own name carried enough weight or if he was convinced that [in this case, Peter] would have said this had he been alive.

In any event, the author's warning that '*...the day of the Lord will come like a thief...*' is extraordinarily similar to Mark's caution last week. Today's message is a bit more soothing, reminding its readers that God does not see time the way we do. What appears to be an age to humans is the blink of an eye to God. God lives, in fact, completely outside the space/time continuum that governs every aspect of our lives.

The letter's description of the day of the Lord is apocalyptic in style and not to be taken literally. The point, says the author, is not so much *when* Christ will return or *how* but that, as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow, he *will* return. We have but to wait as Advent encourages us to do.

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Gospel Acclamation

Luke 3:4, 6

✠ Alleluia, alleluia.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths:
all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

✠ Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mark 1:1-8 *Make straight the paths of the Lord.*

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

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."

The Gospel of the Lord.

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Mark 1:1-8 By John Paul Heil: Main Theme: We prepare for the coming of the Lord by repenting of our sinfulness.

The remarkable response of "all" the people of Judea and Jerusalem to the exuberant and urgent preaching of a baptism of repentance by John attracts us to a similar response. With a willingness to acknowledge our sinfulness and undergo conversion we can vicariously enter the "wilderness" for a new beginning with God and ready ourselves to participate in the salvific activity of the "way of the Lord" to be actualized by the "way" of Jesus. A readiness to repent and receive God's pardon prepares us for future immersion ("baptism") with God's Holy Spirit by Jesus as the "stronger one" to come, thus preparing us for the final coming of Jesus to which the first part of this season of Advent is oriented. Conversion, forgiveness and the expectation of "baptism" with the Holy Spirit enable us to follow the "way" that Jesus will go and teach in the Gospel of Mark, and thus experience and accomplish in our lives the dynamic process of salvation known as the "way of the Lord" together with him.

To effectively continue and complete this "beginning" of the proclamation of this good news about Jesus to others, we are called to imitate the ascetical and repentant lifestyle of John the Baptist, who, aware of his unworthiness, humbly prepared not only himself but others for the coming of the "stronger one."

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