

2nd Sunday of Advent – C

Have the apocalyptic readings from the last few Sundays been getting you down? Not to worry, this Sunday our readings take a more positive turn. And I know that everyone was excited about our first reading today, because this is the only time outside of the Easter Vigil when we have a reading at Mass from the book of Baruch!

The general theme of our readings today is of a “new exodus”, or a return from exile. The first exodus of course was when the Lord freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and they traveled to the Promised Land the Lord gave to them. But because of their sinfulness, they didn’t exactly take the express route, but rather ended up wandering around in the desert for 40 years before finally entering into and taking possession of the Promised Land. Hundreds of years later, after lots of wars and various tribes of Israel being taken away, the last of the 12 tribes of Israel were carried off

into exile in Babylon. The book of Baruch gives a hopeful message to the Israelite exiles, a prophecy that one day the Lord would bring them back from exile to their homeland.

As we heard in our first reading, included in this prophecy is this image: “For God has commanded that every lofty mountain be made low, and that age-old depths and gorges be filled to level ground, that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God.” We hear a very similar message in our reading from the Gospel of Luke, which quotes the prophet Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth....”

To give a little context to these quotes: in ancient times, when a king would visit distant parts of his kingdom, sometimes he would have a highway constructed in advance to make the journey for him and his entourage easier. The higher parts along the way would be

leveled, and the lower parts would be filled in, so there would be less climbing and descending. They would try to make the road somewhat straight, so there would be less winding up and down hills. Think of driving through the mountains on one of the local, two-lane roads: lots of twists and turns and switchbacks – it is pretty slow-going. And contrast this with taking an interstate highway through these mountains – there might be some twists and turns, but in general it is much straighter and much faster.

In the reading from the Gospel of Luke, the person of John the Baptist appears. He is the last of the prophets of the Old Covenant, and he is calling the people to repentance because he says that the Lord, the messiah, the One they have been waiting for, is coming very soon. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah regarding making the paths straight and leveling the mountains and filling in the valleys to “prepare the way of the Lord”. Jesus Christ is the king – the King of Kings – who is coming to visit the distant parts of his kingdom,

and because he is coming, we need to prepare the way for him. But the Lord isn't just coming for a visit, as the prophecies from Baruch and Isaiah tell us, He is also leading His people back from exile to their homeland.

There is of course a spiritual sense to all of this. The spiritual sense is this: the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt and later in Babylon is akin to the spiritual slavery caused by sin. Mankind is enslaved by sin and lives in exile from God because of this sin. But God desires to free us from our slavery to sin and lead us back to our true homeland. In Scripture, it is referred to as Jerusalem, but it is referring not to the city of Jerusalem found in the nation of Israel, but rather to the "heavenly Jerusalem". In other words, God wants to lead us from slavery to sin and exile in this world to freedom from sin in our true homeland of heaven. And His Son Jesus Christ is the One whom God sent to do this.

And so we must prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Not by literally constructing a highway – again there is a spiritual sense here. “Preparing the way of the Lord” means repentance from sin. “Every mountain and hill shall be made low” can be understood as growing in humility, or the humbling of the proud, of those who elevate themselves above others or consider themselves to be greater or more important than others. The “winding roads” and “rough ways” that need to be straightened out for the coming of the Lord can be understood as the contortions of the human heart, twisted and distorted by sin. So preparing the way of the Lord – preparing the way for his coming – has to take place within us, within our own hearts, through self-reflection, self-examination, repentance, and conversion. That’s why the Lord has given us the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so that we might reflect on how we have been living our lives, what sins we have committed that have alienated us from God and from others, what should we have done or be doing that we have been avoiding, out of laziness, slothfulness, selfishness, or self-

centeredness. When we reflect on what needs to change within us and ask God for forgiveness, we make it possible to change – we make it possible for God to change us – we invite Him into our hearts. If we fail to do this, or think we don't really need to change, then we are not preparing the way for the Lord into our own hearts, and we won't change.

In our second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, he urges them to "discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ." That is an important thing to do throughout our lives, but especially during times like the Advent season. And especially at this time of year when there is so much pressure to get caught up in lots of things that don't have much real value. So, add that to your list of things to do: "Get Christmas tree – buy presents – make fruitcake – spread Yuletide cheer – discern what is of value in life." And maybe move that one to the top of the list. Pay attention to those things that occupy lots of our time and

take lots of space in our minds, what might be called mental space, whether it's all the things we think we have to do, and the material or trivial things that might occupy our attention, and the things that cause us grief or sorrow or suffering, and even the things that we find troublesome, irritating, and annoying: whatever it is that occupies our minds. Bring these things to prayer and lay them out before the Lord and ask Him to help you to discern which of these things is really of value. Invite the Lord into your heart, avail yourself of the sacrament of reconciliation, ask the Lord to help you to begin to change what needs to change in your life. In doing these things, we will prepare the way for the Lord, so that he might lead us to the heavenly Jerusalem.

- **December 8, 2024 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**