

2nd Sunday of Advent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 11:1–10
<i>Response</i>	Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 72:1–2, 7-8, 12–13, 17
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 15:4–9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths: all flesh shall see the salvation of God. –Luke 3:4, 6
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 3:1–12

On the Second Sunday of Advent the Church shifts focus. If you recall, last week, the First Sunday of Advent, we were focused on the second coming of Christ, literally on his second advent, his final coming at the end of time. Now, however, the Church is going to shift back and begin to draw our attention, and our focus, to his first advent, the first coming of Christ, as the Messiah, King of the Jews, and the long-awaited Savior. In order to do that, the Church calls our attention, in particular this week and next week, the Second and Third weeks of Advent, to the figure of St. John the Baptist, who was the last of the prophets and the one who was the forerunner and the primary proclaimer of the advent of the Messiah, of the coming of Christ. So we are going to begin with the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3, and we will unpack it and try to see the significance of John the Baptist, and what prophecies exactly he himself was fulfilling, and how Christ was going to fulfill the hope of the Jewish people. So this week's Gospel reading comes from Matthew 3:1–12. It's a little long but it's a very important text, so we'll read it together and then we will ask some key questions about it.

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that

befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”¹

Okay. So there are a couple of key elements about this Gospel that we want to highlight and unpack. First, what was the message of John the Baptist? What was so important about him? You can see it from the passage that says that his primary message was “repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Now most of us, when we hear that expression “the kingdom of heaven,” we tend to assume that it means the afterlife. Where am I going to go when I die? I’m going to the kingdom of heaven. So it’s a kind of metaphor for the afterlife. But that is not primarily what it would have meant in a first century Jewish context. There is some truth to that, but it is not the whole picture because the ancient Jewish people, when they heard the expression, “the kingdom of heaven,” would go back to the prophecies of the Old Testament. In particular, Matthew tells us which prophecy was important here. He says “this was the one spoken of by the prophet Isaiah” who talked about a “voice crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord” (Matt 3:3; cf. Isa 40:3).

Now if you know anything about the Old Testament, you’ll know that the image of preparing the way in the wilderness, or a path through the desert, is an image of the Exodus. If you recall, the twelve tribes of Israel were set free from Pharaoh in Egypt and then they made a way in the wilderness, journeying home to the promised land. That was the first Exodus at the time of Moses. Well, according to prophets, one day in the age of salvation God will perform a new exodus where he would save his people again. And so John the Baptist is heralding the coming of the new exodus and that’s why he goes out to the river Jordan, because, if you remember in the Old Testament, the book of Joshua 4–5, the old Exodus, the first Exodus, ends at the river Jordan when the Israelites miraculously crossed through the waters of the river Jordan and enter into the promised land. So what John the Baptist does is he goes back to the place where the first Exodus ended and he says

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture texts are taken from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994).

the new exodus is now going to begin. The good news of the coming of the kingdom of God, which as we will see in a bit, is not just about going to heaven after you die, but about the fulfillment of all the prophecies of God to his people being fulfilled in the coming of this new and glorious kingdom, and a new exodus to a new promised land, which will be a heavenly promised land.

This is one of the reasons by the way, if you noticed the passage, John was so popular. It says all Jerusalem, all Judea, everyone around the Jordan, they all went out to him to be baptized. Sometimes we forget that although John was the forerunner of Jesus, he was actually in some ways more popular than Jesus in his day. In fact, if you read the writings of the first century Jewish historian Josephus, he gives much more space to his description of John the Baptist than he does to Jesus of Nazareth. And that is kind of indicative of the immense popularity that John the Baptist had with the Jewish people. He was an extremely popular prophet because they knew what he was doing. This guy is out at the river Jordan talking about the prophecies being fulfilled and the way in the wilderness being made. That means that the time for the new exodus is at hand, that the prophecies of God are going to be fulfilled.

There's another element here that's important. John wasn't just heralding a new exodus, he also was a new Elijah. You can see that in the way he dresses. One of the strangest things about John is that it says he had a "garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle around his waist" (Matt 3:4). Why does he dress this way? He's dressing in the exact same way the prophet Elijah dressed. If you go back to the book of Kings, 2 Kings 1:8, it says that Elijah, the prophet, wore "a garment of haircloth, with a belt of leather." So there is as a direct parallel there and the reason that's important is because the Jews would've known that in the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi, it says that before the great and terrible day of the Lord, before the coming of the Lord in judgment, that Elijah must come first. So John is like a new Elijah heralding the new exodus, and the Jews would have known this because they knew the Scriptures. So he's living this stark prophetic life which, by the way, some people wonder about his diet of locusts and wild honey. Well he is living out in the desert. He is an ascetic. He is also obviously a celibate prophet. He is a single person living on his own just like Jesus and Paul will be celibate, and they are going to set up a celibate priesthood (we will do that in another talk sometime). You can see that John is the great prophet heralding the coming of the New exodus.

With that said, another aspect of his teaching is this imagery of the axe laid at the root of the trees, where John is saying to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who

were the Jewish leaders, don't presume that you're going to be saved simply by being a biological descendent of Abraham, simply by being a part of Abraham's family. You don't just have to be a member of Abraham's family to be saved, you have to bear fruit worthy of repentance. So this will be another element that we are going to see throughout the Gospel, the importance not just of faith, but of works as well. That goes all the way back, not just to Jesus, but to John the Baptist. If you don't bear fruit worthy of repentance then the tree, the root of the tree (we'll see what that image is in just a second when we go back to the prophet Isaiah), will be cut down by the Lord in this coming judgment.

The final aspect is the image of the coming one, or the coming judgment. It is very important to notice that John the Baptist is not a prophet who was sent to proclaim himself. He is obviously a very important figure, he is very popular, but he points beyond himself to someone who is going to come after him. Someone who he says is much more powerful than I am and whose "sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Matt 3:11). In other words, I'm not even worthy to be his slave, I'm not even worthy to be his servant. That would've been the task of a servant. If the master came home, the servant would take off their shoes and untie their sandals, and sometimes they would also wash their feet. So John is saying that I am not even worthy to be his slave. So he's pointing beyond himself to this one who is going to come after him, and the one who comes after him isn't going to baptize with water just for repentance, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. So he uses this image of the purifying fire of God's judgment. So he's going to bring the judgment of the Lord. This goes back to the book of Malachi, that Elijah will come before the great and terrible day of the Lord.

So that's all swirling about here in the Gospel text, there is a lot going on. The overall point I want to make about John is that sometimes, as Christians, we tend to underestimate his significance. We don't realize just how important John was in a first century Jewish context, because remember, there hadn't been a prophet, a true prophet of God, on the scene since the time of Daniel, Ezekiel and Malachi. Centuries had gone by without any true prophet arising and now John arises and everyone recognizes that this guy is a prophet of God, and he's come to herald this one who is "mightier than I" (Matt 3:11), this mysterious figure who is going to come after him.

In order to understand the significance of John we have to go back to the Old Testament and look at the prophecies of the age of salvation. Now when we do that something significant happens. We will begin to see exactly why John was so important, but we will also begin to understand what the Church is doing during

the Advent season. What She is trying to do is to put us into the shoes of first century Jews, who saw John and who recognized that he's heralding the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, the coming of the Messiah, and not just the coming of the Messiah, but the coming of the Kingdom of God, and, as we will see in a little while, the coming of God himself. So in order to see that, let's go back to the Old Testament reading for the week. This is from the book of the prophet Isaiah. So for the second Sunday of Advent, we read a very famous and very important prophecy from the book of Isaiah. The lectionary starts in Isaiah 11:1. I'm going to back up just a couple of verses to Isaiah 10:33 just so I can put it in context. What the lectionary is going to give you is a very famous prophecy of the tree of Jesse. We Catholics have heard of the Jesse tree that we use during Advent, that is the text I am about to read, but I want to put it in context based on John the Baptist's prophecy. So this is Isaiah 10:33, leading up to the lectionary passage:

Behold, the Lord, the LORD of hosts
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down,
and the lofty will be brought low.
He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

Notice what I just read. Isaiah is talking about a time of judgment where God is going to come and he has his axe ready to cut down the trees of the people who don't bear fruit, who don't repent, who are immersed in sin. John is obviously alluding to that when he talks about the axe already being laid at the root of the tree. So John is saying the axe that Isaiah spoke of is about to swing. What is the context of that prophecy? That's the negative side, now look at the positive side. Isaiah 11:1 (this is the lectionary reading):

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.

Let's pause there for just a second. Let me unpack this for you as we go through. Notice what he just said there in Isaiah 11:1, a shoot from the stump of Jesse. What does that mean? Well any first century Jew would have known that Jesse was the father of King David, who was the greatest king of Israel. So the image of a shoot from the stump of Jesse's tree is a figure, it's a metaphor, for the Kingdom of David. So David's kingdom, because of its sinfulness, has been cut down and now all that's left is just a stump. But as you know, if you have ever cut down a tree in your backyard, if you cut it down to the stump and then you leave it, what could happen to the stump? It doesn't necessarily kill the tree, what can happen is a shoot can grow out of that stump so that a new tree emerges from the death of the old tree. That's exactly what Isaiah is describing here. It's a metaphor for the Kingdom of David. Although the kingdom of David has been destroyed by the Babylonians and the Assyrians, what's going to happen is a branch from David's house, from the house of Jesse, will grow out, and that branch is the Messiah, he's the son of David, a descendent of David. And he is going to be different, because unlike other kings, he's going to be anointed, but anointed with the spirit of the Lord. So he is going to have wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. These are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. He is going to be righteous judge. He is going to judge the poor with equity. He is going to be a prophet so that he will smite the earth with the rod of his mouth. That is not a real rod but is an image of his word. He is going to slay the wicked with the breath of his lips. Again that's a metaphor for his prophecy, it's not bad breath. He is going to be clothed in righteousness. This is all prophecy of the Messiah that is going to come from the tree of Jesse.

This hope then for a future King, a future Kingdom, a Messiah, a prophet, isn't all. A lot of times Christians will think that the Jews were just waiting for this future King to come and set them free from the Roman Empire. And this is true, some Jews were waiting for that. But if you want to understand John the Baptist, you have to understand that the hopes of the Bible, of the prophets the Old Testament, was much more than just an earthly, political Messiah to set the Jews free from the Roman Empire. You have to read all the prophecies of Isaiah, because if you look here, Isaiah is going to keep talking, not just about a Messiah, but about a new creation, a new Jerusalem, the conversion of the whole world, and even a new

temple. So let's finish the text for the first reading and you'll see this imagery. Verse 6, when this Messiah comes and the root of Jesse is restored:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall feed;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.
In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall
the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious.

Now you might not have caught it, so just to be clear, look at the imagery here. All this imagery of the wolf with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, and the calf and the lion together, that's all imagery of Eden. If you go back to the book of Genesis 2-3, there's peace and harmony not just between Adam and Eve, but Adam and Eve and all creation. So the image here is of an Eden, a paradise restored, where there is no bloodshed, there's no violence, there's no strife, and even the child can play with the adder, or the ass with a serpent, without any risk of being harmed. So those are figures for a new creation, for a new Eden. And then again when he says they shall not hurt or destroy my holy mountain, that is the imagery for a new Jerusalem, a new city of God, where there is not going to be any more pain or suffering or crying anymore, but there will be peace and harmony in the world. And then finally, the image of all the earth being full of the knowledge of the Lord, that's the hope for the conversion of the Gentiles. Whenever you see the image of the Messiah standing as a banner to the nations, that language of nations in Hebrew is *goyim*, which literally means the Gentile nations or just the Gentiles. So the king of Israel is going to be the banner to the Gentiles and they're all going to come and worship the God of Israel. And then finally, one last point here, it says that the King, this future king that Isaiah's describing, that his dwellings shall be glorious. Literally in Hebrew it is his tabernacles shall be glorious. So we have this image of a new sanctuary, a new temple, new places of worship for the glory of God, that will be beautiful and glorious.

So that is what the Jewish people were waiting for. They were waiting for a new kingdom, a new king, a new creation, a new exodus, a new Jerusalem and a new Temple. In other words, they were waiting for all things to be made new and so when John the Baptist comes onto the scene, goes to the waters of the river Jordan, and says the kingdom of heaven is at hand, they all knew what he meant, that he's heralding the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament at last that had been awaited by Jews for centuries to be fulfilled.

If you have any doubt about this you can look the Responsorial Psalm. The Responsorial Psalm for this week acts as a bridge, as usual, between the Old Testament and the New Testament reading. Psalm 72 is a psalm "of Solomon." That is the title in the Hebrew Bible, but what it is really describing is a future king, a Solomonic king, who will not just reign over the twelve tribes of Israel, but will reign over the entire world, a kind of universal king for a universal kingdom. I won't read all of the verses here, but you can just see some of the themes. Psalm 72:1 says this:

Give the king thy justice, O God,
and thy righteousness to the royal son!
May he judge thy people with righteousness,
and thy poor with justice!

And if you skip down to verses 7 and 8:

In his days may righteousness flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!
May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth!

That's much more territory than David or Solomon ever had. It's literally a universal kingdom. So this Psalm was interpreted by Jews as a prophecy of the Messiah, who would reign over all the kingdoms of the earth and who would be called blessed by all the nations of the world. That's what they're waiting for, that's what they're hoping for, and that is what John is talking about when he says, "the coming of the kingdom of God" (cf. Matt 3:2).

And then finally, the last reading we will look at here in the Advent season, the second reading for the New Testament is from the letters of Paul, and carries on

the theme of the hope of the Messiah. In Romans 15:4–9, we read these words from St. Paul (this is the second reading):

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

So we see there Paul picking up on the theme of prophecy and saying that the Scriptures give us hope that salvation will come not just to the Jews but also to all the Gentiles and the nations of the world, and that's what John the Baptist is really heralding when he comes onto the scene and starts talking about the kingdom of heaven and the new exodus taking place.

With that said, two last points here. What do we make of this in terms of the living tradition of the Church? How does all of this come together in the lectionary itself? In this case I think it's very helpful to actually look at the prayers that we use in the Mass. There are certain prayers during the liturgy of Eucharist where the priest will pray a preface. These prefaces are specific to different seasons, and this is the preface for the season of Advent. The priest will pray these words so listen to this in light of everything I have said about what this Sunday is really about. The priest says:

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy father, almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord.

For all the oracles of the prophets foretold him, the Virgin Mother longed for him with love beyond all telling, John the Baptist sang of his coming and proclaimed his presence when he came.

So what are we doing on this second Sunday of Advent? We are in essence putting ourselves in the place of first century Jews and putting ourselves into the shoes of St. John the Baptist himself, as we await the coming of the Messiah, as we prepare for the coming of the Messiah. And what is so important about this for us today, is

to realize that Jesus of Nazareth isn't just one more leader of one more religion, he is the only founder of any major world religion that was ever pre-announced. Christianity is not a man-made religion, it is a religion that is divinely revealed by God and that was prepared for by God over the course of centuries. So that by the time that John the Baptist comes onto the scene, there are dozens and dozens and dozens of prophecies that Jesus is going to fulfill. And this shoot from the stump of Jesse's tree is just one of them. So as the Catechism says, that during Advent the Church unites herself with the desire of St. John the Baptist for the coming of the Kingdom of God and the coming of the King of Glory, Jesus Christ, the King of Kings. This is why it is such a great tradition that we have the Jesse tree in the contemporary Church, of having, during advent season, a tree in the home we can decorate with certain episodes or icons or signs of the stages of salvation history as we prepare for the coming of Christ just like the Jewish people, the chosen people, prepared for the coming of the Messiah for centuries. So too, during these four weeks of Advent, we ready our hearts and our minds to encounter Christ and to meet him in the great feast of Christmas.