

2nd Sunday in Advent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11
<i>Response</i>	Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 85:9-10-11-12, 13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Peter 3:8-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths: All flesh shall see the salvation of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:1-8

The Second Sunday in the Season of Advent for Year B shifts our focus from the final advent, or second coming of Christ at the end of time, to the first advent of Jesus by bringing us back to the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. This again might seem a little more natural that if we are starting Year B, and we are starting with Mark, we would go back to the beginning. So we are going to read here from Mark 1:1-8, and this is the beginning of the second gospel. Now before I begin this reading, note something here that's different about Mark from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke both begin their Gospels with two chapters of discussion about the infancy of Christ, about his nativity, his birth. Mark doesn't do that though, Mark goes straight into the public ministry of Jesus and its preparation in the figure of John the Baptist — who is a very prominent figure during the Advent season because John is the precursor or the forerunner to Christ. So let's read the Gospel through and I will try to highlight a few elements in the passage and help you understand what the passage would have meant in its original context, and also why it is important for the Advent season. So Mark 1:1-8 says this:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
"Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way;
the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make
his paths straight."

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."¹

So what is going on in this particular passage and why is it important for the Advent season? I'd highlight three elements here. Number one, notice the terminology of gospel. So the Revised Standard Version says the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Other translations will say the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. The Greek word there is *euangelion*. *Eu* in Greek is a prefix that just means good. *Angelion* — you can actually hear the English word angel in that — so *euangelion* means good message or good news. We get the word evangelize from that Greek root. To evangelize is to share the good news. So when we use the word gospel, we frequently use it to either refer to one of the four books that are about the life of Christ, or to refer to something that's undeniably true — like gospel truth. But in this context, the book literally begins by saying “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.”

The second element I want to highlight from the Gospel reading here is the importance of the figure of John the Baptist. Most of us are familiar with John the Baptist because we've heard the gospels over and over again. We recognize that John is the forerunner to Jesus. He's the one who comes and announces Jesus in advance. He prepares other people for the coming of Christ, prepares them for the coming of the Messiah. But I would suggest to you that if you're reading Mark's gospel here like a first century Jew, there's a little bit more going on with John the Baptist. If you were a first century Jewish reader of the gospel, you would notice here that John the Baptist isn't just a forerunner to Christ, but that he is a prophet of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the new Exodus. What is the new Exodus? The new Exodus is the expectation of many Jews in the first century A.D. that when God would save his people in the future, as the prophets had foretold, he would do it in ways that were similar to how he had saved his people in the past at the time of Moses, at the time of the Exodus from Egypt — which took place around 1450 B.C (that is the traditional date) — about 1500 years before the time of Christ. So this clue that John was a herald not just of the Messiah, but of the new Exodus, has to do with where he is engaging in his ministry. So notice what it says, he appears in the wilderness baptizing people at the river Jordan. Those two elements there were both signals that pointed Jews back to the Exodus from Egypt. First of all, think about it, when the Israelites left Egypt, where do they go? They went out into the wilderness, in Hebrew the *midbar*, the desert, and they journeyed through the desert for 40 years before they finally came to the promised land. So the first signal that John is going out and preaching the good news of a new Exodus, that the time of salvation is at hand, is that he doesn't stay in Jerusalem. He doesn't stay in the city where it is nice and comfortable, he goes out into the desert just like Israel itself had gone out into the wilderness for the time of the Exodus.

The second clue, that's even more important in some sense, is where John does his baptizing. If you think about it, all you need to baptize someone is water, and there would be plenty of pools of water in the city of Jerusalem. There were these pools called *mikvoth* — the singular is a *mikvah* and the Jews today still utilize them, especially Orthodox Jews — that were used for ritual baths. It's like an in-ground pool where you would descend down into the *mikvah* in order to purify yourself to prepare to enter into the Temple for example, or to prepare yourself for prayers, or to prepare yourself like a bride who would wash before a wedding. In any case, John could've baptized people in the city of Jerusalem if he had wanted to, but he takes them out to the river Jordan and there he's baptizing them with this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now what does that have to do with the exodus? Well if you were a first century Jew, you would know that the river Jordan was where the first Exodus ended. If you go back for a minute — this isn't in the readings but I think it's worth highlighting — to the book of Joshua 3:14-17, it tells us the story of how the Exodus ended. How did the Exodus end? It ended with the 12 tribes of Israel crossing over the River Jordan and entering into the promised land. So it says:

when the people set out from their tents, to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people and when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap far off, at Adam, the city that is beside Zar'ethan, and those flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea [we call that the Dead Sea today], were wholly cut off; and the people passed over opposite Jericho. And while all Israel were passing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

That would have been a very famous story for Jews in the first century A.D. Although for many Christians today the book of Joshua might not be the most popular book, that was a memorable event for a first century Jew. So in other words, John the Baptist is proclaiming that the new Exodus is at hand in the same place where the first Exodus ended. He's going to inaugurate the new Exodus where the old Exodus ended. That's one of the reasons he is so popular. Notice what the passage said...all of Judea, all the people of Jerusalem, everyone's going out to John in the river Jordan to confess their sins. Why? What is the draw, what is so attractive about John? Well they recognize that John is the prophet of the new Exodus, and you can see this again just by Mark's opening line because he says "as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'behold, I send my messenger before your face, will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" When is the last time the Lord made a path through the wilderness? When was the last time the Lord made a path through the desert? Well it was at the time of Moses, it was at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. So every first century Jew would've known that what they were waiting for was this new Exodus when God will make a new way in the wilderness like Isaiah had said. Onto the scene steps John and he begins preparing the people through this symbolic action of baptizing them in the river Jordan to, in a sense, inaugurate the new Exodus.

The third and final point about the gospel is that John isn't just a prophet of the new Exodus, he's also a prophet of this mysterious figure, "the coming one" or "he who

is to come.” One of the reasons I smile when I say that and I stress it is because frequently scholars and lay readers will say that John proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, John was the forerunner to the Messiah. Of course that is true because Christ is the Messiah. The interesting thing is when you look at John's words here, he never uses the word Messiah. He doesn't say anything about the Messiah. What he says is “After me comes he who is mightier than I,” this mysterious figure of the one was stronger than me. Or in other Gospels he will say “after me is he who is to come,” the coming one. Obviously he is speaking about the coming of Jesus, because if you skip down just a few verses — it is not in the lectionary — the very next verse, verse nine says “in those days Jesus came.” So John proclaims that there is going to be a coming one and then in verse nine John says “Jesus came.” Which, by the way, in Latin the word for “to come” or “coming” is *adventus*. So another reason the Church is putting this gospel before us is because it's describing the advent of Christ, not so much in his incarnation, but in his public ministry, his coming to the people. So Jesus here is coming, John anticipates that Jesus is coming, but in order to herald Jesus' coming, John does something fascinating, he quotes Isaiah 40. Well, actually John doesn't quote it in this Gospel, Mark quotes it for you, but in the other gospels John himself will quote the text. Now why does that matter?

Well let's go back to Isaiah 40 and not just look at the verse about the new Exodus, but the whole context, which just so happens to be our first reading for today. So this one is pretty obvious. Why does the Church give us Isaiah 40 as the first reading for the Second Sunday of Advent? Well because that's the text that Mark himself quotes at the beginning of his book. But let's go back and look at it in a little more detail because what you are going to see is that Isaiah 40 isn't just a prophecy of the new Exodus, it's also a prophecy of the future forgiveness of sins, of the coming of good news, and then finally of the coming of God himself. Listen to these verses, this is the first reading for the day, Isaiah says:

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

And if you skip down to verse 9, the lectionary continues:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;

Which can also be translated as good news.

lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"
Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

There is a lot going on here. Let me just highlight four things. Number one, notice the prophecy begins with the future forgiveness of Israel's sins. So what is Isaiah saying? He is saying one day Israel and Jerusalem, your iniquity will be pardoned, your sins will be forgiven. Second, he's also prophesying a new Exodus. Once again notice that imagery, make straight a path in the desert for our God. When's the last time he did that? At the Exodus from Egypt. But Isaiah is living many centuries after the Exodus from Egypt and he's talking about a future path being made in the desert, so this is the prophecy of the new Exodus. Third, and this is really important, I still remember the first time I noticed this, it blew my mind. Isaiah uses the language of good news. In other words, he uses the language of the gospel. This is a prophecy of the gospel. You can see this more clearly in the Greek translation of Isaiah called the Greek Septuagint, which was an ancient Jewish translation of the Old Testament made a couple hundred years before Christ, in which the Greek word is *euangelizomai*. In other words, proclaim good news, give a good message. And you can hear there that we get the word *euangelion* or evangelize from that Greek expression. So when when Isaiah is speaking about this future new Exodus, he basically says to the city of Jerusalem, get up to a high mountain and proclaim the good news, proclaim the gospel. Now what is the gospel? Well that is point number four.

I think today, if you asked somebody what is the gospel, they will talk about the book about Jesus's life (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John), or maybe they will even say the gospel is the good news of Jesus' death for my sins, like his passion and death and resurrection. Those are all true, but the first time we see the language of good news in the Bible, what is the subject of the good news? It's the coming of God himself. It's the coming of the Lord God to his people, to Jerusalem, to Judea, to save them from their sins and to inaugurate the new Exodus. Now that is really, really powerful. First, because in the Latin Vulgate the verb is *veniat*, we get the word *adventus* from that root. So these are all advent passages in the Latin tradition of the Bible, so you can see why the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages would be reading these texts during Advent, because they actually use the words for Advent. But even more so, what it shows us is that when John comes onto the scene as the voice crying out in the wilderness, and Mark says he's got the good news of Isaiah 40, and then John says one is coming after me whose thongs I am not worthy to untie, who is John talking about? Isaiah doesn't say anything about the Messiah either. Isaiah's talking about the coming of God, the advent of God;

and that's the mystery that we are prepared for during Advent. In Jesus, not only does the Messiah come, but God himself comes in the flesh. So those are the two readings.

The Psalm for today is Psalm 85. It bridges that gap between the old and new. It kind of forms a bridge. And in Psalm 85, the theme of this Psalms is real simple, it is that salvation is at hand. You can see this in verse 9 of this Responsorial Psalm:

Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.

Remember that glory is always the presence of God. Why is salvation at hand? Because the glory is going to come and dwell with us. And then again, verse 13, skip a few verses down:

Righteousness will go before him,
and make his footsteps a way.

Or in the Greek, a *hodos*, like a path in the desert. This is a really cool verse because in ancient Jewish tradition, whenever you see the image of footsteps in the Psalms, like in Psalm 89, they interpreted that as a reference to the Messiah. There was a Jewish expression called the footsteps of the Messiah. Those were like the clues that the Messiah was coming. Just like if you might not see someone you can hear their footsteps maybe in the woods hunting or something — you hear someone's footsteps before you see their face — the Jews had this tradition that the footsteps of the Messiah were the signs that the Messiah was coming. You could hear him coming and approaching. So this Psalm is about the coming of God and the footsteps of God getting closer and closer because salvation is not far away anymore, it's now, it's coming, it is at hand. Okay, so those are the two Old Testament readings.

What about the second reading? Well in this case, just like with the first Sunday of Advent, the second reading is thematically linked to the season. So I would like to say a few words about it here. The reading here is from 2 Peter 3:8-14, one of my favorite epistles in the New Testament. In keeping with the Advent theme of being

prepared for the second advent of Christ, or the final coming of Jesus, this second reading is about the end of time. This is what 2 Peter says:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

So what is this passage about? Well it's about the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord was an early Christian expression used to refer to what we call today the end of time or the final judgment. And what Peter is saying is that at the end of time, at this final judgment, the entire cosmos, the earth and the heavens, will pass away. They will be dissolved, they will be burned up with fire. Now I frequently get a question about this expression. Sometimes students will read the words *heaven* will pass away and they think, "wait a second, heaven is the realm where God dwells. That is the invisible realm where the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell. How is heaven going to pass away?" That's a misunderstanding of the text. In first century Judaism, the expression heaven and earth was an idiom, it was a way of referring to the visible cosmos. So the earth is the place where we live, the land and the seas all around us; and heaven is the sky and then also what we call outer space, the visible universe above us. So from a Jewish perspective, if you say heaven and earth will pass away, what you mean is the entire universe, the entire visible, material cosmos will be dissolved.

And what Peter says here is that it will be destroyed with fire. Which, if you remember in the book of Genesis, God said he would never destroy the world again with a flood, but this is when it is going to be destroyed by fire. I remember

when I was a kid actually, I was reading the story of Genesis and I remember being upset by the flood, the destroying of the world, and I think I asked my mom about it. I said “well why did the Lord destroy the whole world with a flood?” And I think my mother said something to the effect of “well it is okay, he promised he never will destroy it again with the flood, next time it will be with fire.” And I remember thinking “okay, that is not really that comforting that it is going to be with fire rather than water.” But the image here is not destruction in order to annihilate the universe, but a purifying fire, a cleansing fire in order to make everything new again. So God doesn't destroy the world in order to throw it into the dustbin or trashcan of history, he burns the elements up in order to make a new heaven and a new earth, as St. Peter says in 2 Peter 3:13. So again, understand that correctly, new heaven and new earth means a new universe, a new cosmos, or as you frequently see in the New Testament, the new creation. So why is that reading there? Again, it's connected with the thematic correspondence of Advent as being about two comings, the first coming of Christ 2000 years ago and then the second advent of Christ at the end of time, at the final judgment, at the end of the world.

I would like to close our reflections on this opening passage from the Gospel of Mark with something a little different than what I usually do. What I will usually do is take a citation from the living tradition of the Church, from like an early church Father or something like that, to give you a sense of what the text meant in its ancient context. But here I would like to take something from an ancient Roman context that might shed some light on what Mark's gospel would've meant to a first century pagan, someone living in the Greco-Roman world. It has to do with the language of good news. You might have noticed in the gospel there, Mark begins his Gospel by saying the good news, the *euangelion*, of Jesus Christ, the son of God. Well that expression good news wasn't just a term that came from the Jewish Scriptures in the book of Isaiah about the coming of God. It was also a technical expression that was used in the Roman empire to announce the birth of Caesar. This is really interesting. So scholars have unearthed what is called the Priene Inscription. It's an ancient Greek inscription from the Roman Empire that is dated to around nine years before Christ, so about 9 B.C., and it's about the birth of Caesar Augustus. This is how the Romans announced the birth of Caesar — and I want you to listen to this with the Gospel of Mark's reference to the good news of Christ in mind. This Priene Inscription says:

Since the Providence which has ordered all things is deeply interested in our life has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit mankind, sending him as a savior (*sōter*), both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (*epiphanein*), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus (*hē geneulious tou theou*) was the beginning for the world of the good tidings (*euangeliōn*) that came by reason of him”²

As Richard B. Hays, who teaches at Duke, and other scholars have pointed out, this passage is really striking because it uses the exact same language that the gospels use, the language of the good news of the birth of Christ, to announce the good news of the birth of Caesar, who wasn't just regarded as a king but who was regarded as a savior and even as a God. He was divinized, he was called the divine Caesar. That's really striking because if you recall, the Gospel of Mark was often believed, both in ancient and modern times, to have been written for Christians living in the city of Rome. So they would have been familiar with the emperor. So how does Mark begin his gospel? He begins with the *euangelion*, the good news of the coming of God in Jesus Christ, the good news of the coming of the Savior, the Messiah, this man from Nazareth. So it immediately sets up a contrast. Either you are going to accept the good news of the divine Caesar and accept him as your god, or you are going to accept the good news of the Divine Savior, Jesus, the son of God, the God who made the heavens and earth. So I just bring it up because it just goes to show that the the Gospels have to be put back in their ancient context, and not just Jewish, but also the Greco-Roman context, their pagan context. When you do, you can see that from the beginning of Mark's Gospel, far from being merely human, Jesus is being revealed as divine, because this is the good news of the coming of God himself, like Isaiah had said in Isaiah 40, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

So in closing then I'll bring in one last word from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I've used this before and I am going to keep using it. If you look at what

² trans. in HCNT 1995, 169; cf. R. Hays, 2016, p. 92

the Catechism says about the Advent season, it gives us a line that's worth pondering about John the Baptist's role in particular:

*When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year... By celebrating the precursor's [John the Baptist's] birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: "He must increase, I must decrease..."*³

So in other words, during the Advent season we are not just putting ourselves back in the shoes of first century Jews, who were waiting for God to come and save them, we are in a particular way uniting ourselves to the desire of St. John the Baptist, who was longing for Christ to come and whose posture towards Jesus was always "he must increase, I must decrease." This is the basic law of our own spiritual lives, to let Christ increase and for us to decrease so that he might shine brighter and brighter with the light of Advent through us.

³ CCC 524; cf. feast of the Nativity John the Baptist [June 24th] and feast of the Nativity of Christ [Dec 25th]