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December 4, 2016

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Look at your Advent Calendar. Can you spot John the Baptist with his 100% organic outfit and odd, non-vegetarian diet? Although he hardly fits the cute calendar images, he's a key character of the Advent season. His warning that it's time to change our behavior may sound a bit like "You'd better watch out, you'd better not pout..." but the reward he promises for conversion is not at all like a tinsel tree surrounded by toys and electronics.

John is indeed promising a reward, but it's one that only the needy and the converted will really appreciate. Right in line with the prophets before him, John calls people to get ready to meet God on their path. God, he says, is preparing something so new that it can only be compared to a refinement by fire – and they'll be baptized in it. That means there's a lot in their lives that needs to be blown away by the winnowing wind of the Spirit.

John proclaims this message most directly to the overtly religious types who show up on his riverbank. Lest the crowds think that his is simply another religious show like the sacrifices that fattened the priests and their purses, John calls out the leaders with the demand that they produce something worthwhile and not count on their baptismal certificate or Abrahamic lineage to give them an "admit one free" pass on the work of salvation. John's preaching echoes Isaiah, his predecessor in prophecy,

and puts an extra sharp edge on the message. But even Isaiah's beautiful promises demand more than we might note at first glance.

Today we hear Isaiah announce the coming savior, someone who will rise out of the ruins of a once great, now defeated, religious people. The one to come will be an ideal leader, someone whose profound love and reverence for God will be supplemented by gifts of insight and the ability to enforce justice. The proof of this leader's absolute impartiality will be that the poor and afflicted are treated with genuine justice.

If we really want to appreciate Isaiah's promises, we need to step out of our own comfortable loafers and imagine walking in the worn out sandals of people who have nothing but hope. In order to glimpse the faces and feet of some of our neediest sisters and brothers we need only look at our newspaper, google "Syrian refugees," or go to the website of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees and look up Sudan at **www.unhcr.org**. In these days of Advent, surrounded as we are by glitter and glitz, we need to gaze upon the people pictured there. Seeing them, we can try to listen with their ears to Isaiah's words about the one who will bring justice. It is for such as these that the promised Messiah was to come. The question we must ask is whether we can share their hopes for the coming of God's justice. If we can, we'll receive their reward with them.

There are 21 days left until Christmas. In these pre-Christmas days, a time culturally devoted to enjoying the company of friends and thinking of what gifts to give to those we love, we are called to celebrate Advent as an integral part of the holiday season. That means that we think not only of our guest lists and menus but that we also dedicate time to consider those whom we can never invite because they are so far away – geographically, economically or psychologically. Once we have contemplated them and their plight, we can pray for them, aware – better said, forewarned – that God may work through our prayer in unexpected ways.

We might say that Advent invites us to consider God's wish list with as much attention as we put into finding the right presents for others. Isaiah, Paul and John the Baptist all talk about God's hopes. Isaiah says that God wants us to yearn for and accept the Spirit who offers the gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength and fear of the Lord. Those are the capacities needed to create the community Paul envisions, a community that attracts others to know and glorify God. The Baptizer then calls us to take all of those lofty ideals and make them as

concrete as the fruits of the trees to which the world looks for nourishment.

We don't have to live like John the Baptist to be an Advent people, but we do need to listen to his message. He's telling us the time is always short for those in need. God is waiting on our roads, disguised in the people who have nothing left but hope. We'd better watch out!

ISAIAH 11:1-10

In today's reading Isaiah doesn't identify the one to come except to say that he will descend from what had appeared to be the defunct line of Jesse. That distinguished him in the only way necessary; he belonged to the people of God. Rather than being identified by name, this ruler will be recognizable by the gifts he has and what he will do with them. The three pairs of gifts the Spirit will give equip him to be the kind of king who serves God on behalf of Israel.

The first pair of gifts, wisdom and understanding, have to do with reading the signs of the times. Understanding allows one to comprehend the current context in the light of God's activity in history. Wisdom is the gift of being able to decide how best to act as a result of that knowledge. Together, wisdom and knowledge are the springboard of prophetic action. The gift of counsel is the ability to know what to do with advice, whether to take it or leave it, including how to avoid being influenced by selfish motives, be they one's own or those of advisors who should have the integrity to recuse themselves. The gift of strength implies that once this ideal leader has come to a conclusion about what is best, he will have the character to carry it out – no matter what influences war against him.

What crowns the gifts are knowledge and fear of the Lord. The implication here is that all valuable knowledge comes from knowing God. That doesn't mean that theology is the only science, but rather that everything known is comprehended in the light of God's presence and action. Thus, "fear of the Lord" is mentioned twice, implying that the righteous ruler portrayed here understands that he is not God and also knows and trusts God beyond his own capacity to understand. In the end all this leads to the conclusion that the one to come, the righteous ruler, is God's own representative in the midst of the people.

As Isaiah continues, he moves beyond the realm of ideas, the characteristics or personality traits of the new ruler, to describe what that leader will do. John the

Baptist demanded to see the fruit of one's attitudes, the one who is to come stands out for his activity on behalf of the poor. The time to come that Isaiah predicts is the time when all conflicts will be resolved. God's chosen king will bring justice to all who are afflicted. Not needing swords or chariots, the truth of his words will be all the power needed to undermine the ruthless and the wicked. So well will he carry this out that it will seem as if justice had been the thread that wove his very garments. Then even that which seemed awry with nature will come into harmony - even the wild creatures will cease to be a danger to each other.

When all this happens, the kingdom will be a sign to the nations. The truth which rules in this realm will conquer the world by its attractive power. No matter how unfaithful the people have been, no matter how seemingly lifeless they seemed to have become, God's power can bring about this change. Thus says the Lord.

ROMANS 15:4-9

We might almost imagine that Paul wrote this segment of his letter for people who looked at the promises of Scripture and asked, "What's gone wrong? Why hasn't God's reign won the day?" Paul responds by saying, "Look at the Scriptures written for another time and different circumstances. They have something to tell us today. Let yourselves be as moved by God's word as you are by what you see around you! When, like Isaiah's righteous ruler, you learn to deal with reality in the light of God's promise you will understand rightly." Paul insists that the Scripture and tradition are vital for us. It is not that they give precise answers to any questions or a timeline for the second coming, but they teach us endurance.

Endurance is the gift nobody wants to need. It is exemplified by people like Job and the martyrs. Endurance can be described as persevering steadfastness - a characteristic one needs only in very trying times. Paul knows that the Roman community is living in trying times, times he described as the birth pangs of a new creation. They have few choices about their times; they can either allow circumstances to defeat their faith or choose to continue together in hope, motivated by their common faith in Christ Jesus.

In the end, Paul is calling on the community to live in faith - with all the endurance their circumstances might require. In Paul's mind, people who believe in Christ can never go it alone. They have been called together and only when they appreciate the fact that they were each called for one another can they become what God

wants them to be. They are not a natural community; instead, their ties come from God, not from any inclination of their own. In God's mysterious plan, the only way they can become what God knows they can be, is to do it in community. Because of this Paul tells them to receive one another, to accept one another, as Christ has received them. As they grow in community, the truth of who they are and are becoming in Christ will serve as their greatest evangelizing tool. It is their love for one another – especially when it requires endurance – that will lead others to glorify God.

MATTHEW 3:1-12

John the Baptist takes center stage in the Second Week of Advent. Matthew portrays him as a prophet's prophet. Although Luke presents him as son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Matthew has him "appear" in the desert as if out of nowhere other than from God's eternal plan. John is as unlike his ordinary contemporaries as Jesus will be like them. Between them they almost depict the contrast between belief in a fearsome, punishing image of God and the shepherd of lost sheep. John knows he is not the centerpiece of his day, but he also knows that he plays a vital role.

John's mission was to gear the people up, to remind them of how all the promises of old assured them that the broken world they knew was neither the will of God nor was it definitive. Relying on his religious traditions, John interpreted his times and preached that God would soon intervene, but the people had to be ready if they were to be a part of what God was about to do in their midst.

John's baptism was the sign of their preparation. It was a proclamation of each one's desire for metanoia. John stirred up the hearts of his people, reminding them that the shallowness of their lives and the institutional injustice of their society was sin and therefore both unnecessary and vincible. John's mission was to drive home the message that the way things were was not the only possibility, that God had something much better in mind.

John's apocalyptic images were geared to explode every sluggish mindset. He wasn't saying that there was no good in his society. There were fruit-bearing trees, and there was wheat as well as chaff, but it was time for a major shakeup. John wanted each person to judge her or his own life, sifting weed from grain and then go into the water to come out renewed and ready for what was to come.

This is a hard time of year to proclaim the prophetic message of metanoia. It's a tougher sell than is typically intended with "Let's put Christ back in Christmas" campaigns. That's why we need John the Baptists to force us to ask "Is this all there is?" While the metanoia message may seem to be a downer in the holidays, it is truly the only way to get at the meaning of the season.

John the Baptizer will always seem to be a voice crying out in the wilderness; it's the task of today's prophets to remind others that too much of this world is a wilderness of our own creation, and that's precisely why we can hope for a change.

Ultimately, because we believe in God, hope is the message of the day. Today's loudest voice in the wilderness may well be Pope Francis who in "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home" invites us to pray:

Triune God, wondrous community of infinite love ... Awaken our praise and thankfulness for every being that you have made. Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined to everything that is ... God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love ... O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. (#246)

Planning: 2nd Sunday of Advent (A)

By: Lawrence Mick

Writing these columns months in advance makes it difficult to know how to suggest linking our worship to current events and concerns. It's probably not too much of a risk, though, to assume that terrorists will still be threatening our sense of security, that wars will still be raging around the world, that race relations in the U.S. will still be tense, that climate change will still be a major threat to the future of the planet, and that people will still be struggling how to cope with all the negative news that assaults us day after day.

How do we celebrate Advent in such times? Can Advent offer us a helpful response to our fears and concerns?

There are two basic ways to respond to such concerns: negative and positive. On the negative side, we might rail against evil and warn the evildoers, taking our lead from John the Baptist in today's Gospel. Or we might give in to fear and despair, deciding that the world is coming to an end and there's nothing we can do about it. Or we might allow hatred to take root in our hearts, especially aimed at those who seem to

threaten us.

On the other hand, we might take our cue from Isaiah in the first reading. He did not live in easy times, either, yet he is able to hold onto hope that God has better things in store for the human race. He foresees the peaceful kingdom where lamb and wolf lie down together and where there “shall be no harm or ruin on all [God’s] holy mountain.” This is not just a pipe dream but the vision for which we must strive. It helps to remember that the world has faced many troubled times in the past and we have found a way through them. We can do so today if we embrace God’s will and God’s ways.

Planners and preachers might discuss together how to offer hope to parishioners. Advent is a season of hope; see what songs lift people up in hope. Write petitions that encourage hope and perseverance through tough times. Preach in a way that reminds people of the reasons we have to hope: God’s love for us and Christ’s presence among us. Choose among the options for Mass those prayers that speak to our call to be people of hope (e.g. the fourth version of the Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs: “And may your church stand as a living witness to truth and freedom, to peace and justice, that all people may be raised up to a new hope”).

Prayers: 2nd Sunday of Advent (A)

By: Joan DeMerchant

INTRODUCTION

In a chaotic world filled with personal, political and often environmental turmoil, it is easy to long for someone coming from the outside to help us, to “fix” things. But today we are reminded that something is also required of us. Preparing for Christ was and is a serious task, involving our own need for hope and repentance. We can look to Jesus for solace and assistance, but we are called to “make straight his paths” and to “produce good fruit as evidence of (our) repentance.” His coming makes great demands on us.

PENITENTIAL ACT

- Lord Jesus, you come to judge the poor with justice: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you come to restore peace and harmony:
- Christ, have mercy. Lord Jesus, you call us to be ready for your coming: Lord, have mercy.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider: As we prepare for Jesus' coming to us, we pray for our needs and for those of the whole world.

Minister: For the church: that we may be a community committed to hope and repentance ... with waiting hearts, we pray

- For our nation and for the world, that we may be committed to restoring peace and justice for all ... with waiting hearts, we pray
- For the courage to work together to restore national unity...with waiting hearts, we pray
- For hearts that are open to preparing the way for Jesus' coming...with waiting hearts, we pray
- For all whose lives are consumed with providing for the needs of others ... with waiting hearts, we pray
- For families struggling with the demands of this holiday season ... with waiting hearts, we pray,
- For the sick, the grieving and the tired among us; and for those who have died ... (names)... with waiting hearts, we pray

Presider: God of promise and encouragement, we turn to you for the energy and commitment we need to make straight the paths for Jesus' coming. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the demands of life and the world's many needs. We seek wisdom and understanding, knowledge and strength. Give us what you have promised, we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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