



by Mary M. McGlone

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Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. What's the line that sticks with you? Is it "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" or "Every valley shall be exalted"? That might be the test of whether you are more a fan of *Godspell* or Handel's *Messiah*. Those two show us how popular culture picks up on Scripture and brings it into mainstream consciousness. (Yes, Handel started out as part of 18th-century popular culture.) Once we get out of the realm of music, those two lines could summarize the message of this Second Sunday of Advent.

"Prepare ye the way!" What's the call in that? John the Baptist, one of the Christian Scripture's most colorful characters, got people's attention with that message. We quote him as saying "repent," but the word he used wasn't quite so puritanical. John didn't call for self-incriminating scruples but for a radical open-mindedness. The Greek word is *metanoia*, coming from *meta* which means "beyond" and *nous* which refers "to the mind." Thus, *metanoia* can be seen as a call to go beyond our typical or "normal" mindset. It speaks of a change in our vision of life that will bring about a transformation of the way we live.

The Gospel tells us that everybody was flocking to John at the Jordan to confess their sins and go through John's cold-water, cleansing dunk. If we imagine that scene with the excesses of crowds and enthusiasm Mark describes, we will get quite a picture.

The crowd's confession of sin wasn't at all what we think of as a recitation of transgressions — and there was nothing private about it. It was a communal and enthusiastic public demonstration in which groups of people got excited about the idea that life could be much better than it was. Their confession said, "We've settled for less, but no more!"

The corollary to that confession, what brought it about and what it was intended to lead to, was a dream about how things could be. Isaiah offered people a vision of a world without the divisions and barriers symbolized by valleys and mountains. Everything that plagued people, families and nations would be smoothed out. The whole world would see how good God is. All peoples would learn that the power of God is the power of love, that God enters history not as a warrior but like a shepherd.

Mark doesn't spell out John's version of that dream in the ways that Matthew and Luke do. Mark cuts to the quick and says John preached three things: repentance, forgiveness and the coming of one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Mark often gives us the Cliffs Notes version of the Gospel, an approach that challenges us to spell out the details in the ways most appropriate to our own time and place.

This year, the Second Sunday of Advent comes exactly in between two great feasts of Mary: the Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of Guadalupe. The feast of the Immaculate Conception celebrates Mary as the first one redeemed by Christ; we might think of her as the first fully human person in history, the one who fulfilled all her potential as a child of God, a fully self-giving collaborator with the plan of God. The feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe brings the Gospel message uniquely home to the Americas. In celebrating *La Morenita* (as she is fondly called in Spanish-speaking cultures), we celebrate the fact that the Incarnation implies inculturation. Just as the word took flesh in the first century, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a visible image of Christianity's ability to express itself in the signs and symbols, the language and culture of every people on earth.

The Second Sunday of Advent invites us to a meta-dream. Isaiah and the images of the Blessed Virgin give us a vision of what life can be like. We are created with the potential to share divine life, to share the joy of being part of a humanity at peace, smoothing out what divides us and rejoicing in the multiple ways our different cultures can incarnate the love of God. We will never make it happen if we don't first imagine it. The call to repent is a call to let go of our puny expectations. The promise

of forgiveness tells us that God will never condemn us to remain trapped in the selfishness we have chosen. There is always more possibility.

Finally, the promise of Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit tells us that we, like Mary, can be overshadowed by God and become bearers of Christ's presence in our world. The glory of the Lord can be revealed in us and among us. Let us open our minds and hearts and prepare the way of the Lord.

### **ISAIAH 40:1-5, 9-11**

This selection from Isaiah sets the direction for today's readings as a reflection on God's involvement in history. Isaiah wrote from a particular worldview, a theology that believed that God directly controls the events of human history. If the people prospered, God was blessing them; if they were in exile, God was punishing them. They deserved their punishments, but God's wrath would not endure forever, and whatever happened, everything was under God's direct rule.

Most of us probably do not share that perspective. While we may pray for good weather and peace on earth, we believe that human agency has a direct, causative effect on whether people starve and nations go to war. In recent decades, we have become much more aware of the effects of human behavior on the weather itself. How are we to understand readings like today's selection from Isaiah?

Perhaps the line we concentrate on should be "Prepare the way of the Lord." We hear that from Isaiah and then John the Baptist repeats the refrain. How do we prepare the way of the Lord? The question leads us to ask how we have experienced God's presence in and influence on history — our own personal history as well as that of the world.

What distinguishes Judaism, Islam and Christianity from other world religions is our belief in God's involvement in human history. All three traditions envision God as the Creator, the giver of all life. Christianity gives that kind of faith a unique focus through belief that Jesus Christ offers us God's ongoing invitation and potential to participate in the eternal life of divine love. That tells us the deepest meaning of "give comfort to my people." Paul taught us this in Romans 8, and Ignatius of Loyola explained it with his injunction to find God in all things. The bottom line is that we believe in Emmanuel, God with us. That's all the comfort we could ever want.

## **2 PETER 3:8-14**

“With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years.” Isaiah has told us that God says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts ... my ways are not your ways” (Isaiah 55:9). Now the author of 2 Peter tells us that God’s watch is not on our time zone and God’s work in history ignores our chronology.

When this letter was written, one of the Christian community’s burning questions was why the end of the world was taking so long to come. The early Christians really thought that the final day of the Lord was about to dawn; they believed that creation would be transformed through a conflagration that would put an end to evil and its purveyors and bring the righteous home to eternal felicity in God. Then, as the dawn and dusk continued to follow one another with no apparent disruption, the skeptics began to mock the Christians for their historical naiveté and the moral code that flowed from their belief that the end was near.

The way Peter chose to deal with the Christian’s dilemma was not to talk about the end, but to talk about God. Peter wanted his people to stop concentrating on the chronology and to look at the theology. He asks “What are we to learn about God and ourselves from this unexpected prolongation of history?” The first answer is that God’s promise will be fulfilled. Just as surely as God raised Christ from the dead, the end of the apparent rule of evil will come about. God’s love and desire for life for everyone is the moving force of history, no matter what things may look like today.

The second part of Peter’s teaching reminds them that God is God and that they can’t predict when and how God will bring it all about. The only way they can make a difference is by living like people who are certain that God’s reign is in the process of fulfillment.

Understanding that underlying message allows us to see that even if we are not anticipating the immanent end of the world, the Second Letter of Peter has something to say to us. The reminder, that God’s time is different, reminds us of the larger truth about the limitations of our perspective compared to the sweep of history, much less in relation to God’s own vantage point.

This reading calls us to take time to think about what we really believe about where history is headed. Peter tells us that God is continually active, even if subtly, and drawing all things forward into the life that will not perish. If we believe that, Peter

calls us to consider what it means for our way of living.

As the Second Letter of Peter draws to a close, we are invited to take the long view. We can't manage God's perspective. But we can amplify our own vision by faithfully remembering that the divine vantage point is larger than ours. When we have taken steps in that direction, when we remember that God is drawing all things toward the fullness of divine life, then all we need to do is move forward, eager to be ready for what God is preparing. It is greater than we can imagine, but if we do as Peter suggests by growing in holiness and devotion, we will find our imagination and joy growing as well.

### **MARK 1:1-8**

The first word of Mark's Gospel is "the beginning" (*arche*). That's a grand word to start with. The book of Genesis begins with the same word. Mark did that on purpose. By echoing Genesis 1:1, Mark indicates that what he is about to tell us is as momentous as the moment of creation itself.

The verse has a second, more subtle function as well. Mark's original Gospel ended at Chapter 16, Verse 8. (For further information on the Gospel ending, see the notes at the USCCB website.) Referring to the women who had discovered the empty tomb it says: "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Scripture scholar and Blessed Sacrament Fr. Eugene LaVerdiere used to point out that those two verses interpret one another and everything in between. In the first line of his Gospel, Mark announced that what he was about to tell was only "the beginning." After Christ's resurrection, it was up to the disciples whether or not the story would continue to be told. It was up to them — it is up to us — to overcome fear and carry on what began in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Mark quickly moves from the philosophical to the historical, telling us that what is starting in this story is related to all that God has done in the past. John the Baptist fulfills the role of the one Isaiah described as crying out in the wilderness and preparing for all that God was about to do. Mark didn't say that as a proof text, a way of saying "Isaiah foresaw all that was going to happen when John went to the desert, therefore you must believe in it."

The point Mark is making is that what happened with John and then Jesus was a part of the divine plan that had been unfolding from the beginning and was in tune with

everything that God had said and done through the prophets. The events of the Gospel were not a breach in history, but the beginning of the fulfillment of God's plan.

By opening his Gospel this way, Mark was alerting his readers that he was reading the signs of the times in the light of their religious tradition. By calling this the beginning, he was implicitly telling them that they too, were called to do the same. The first line of Mark's Gospel tells us that all that happened with Jesus was the beginning of the fulfillment of God's plan for history. It also calls us to continue with what was begun, to read the signs of our times in order to discover the imprint of God's ongoing activity among us.

After that, Mark tells us what John did. He called for repentance, *metanoia*, that attitude of being willing to turn ourselves inside out, to see with new eyes, to acknowledge that we have allowed ourselves to be far less than we could be. John's baptism was a sign of that confession and a plea for forgiveness.

Then came the announcement: "One mightier than I is coming. ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." That is the real beginning that Mark was signaling. More than ever before, God was going to be active in history through the ministry of Jesus, the one through whom the Spirit would become active in believers.

The Gospel of John presents all of this philosophically or mystically, explaining it through beautiful discourses. Mark goes at it simply and directly. Both are trying to introduce the Christian community into the faith that with Christ, everything has changed. The obvious implication is, therefore, that everyone can change as well.

## **Planning: 2nd Sunday of Advent**

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings seem to continue last week's themes. John the Baptist calls for repentance and echoes Isaiah's call to prepare the way of the Lord. But Isaiah begins by proclaiming God's comfort for Jerusalem, for her guilt is expiated. Once again, repentance leads to joy. In other strong passages, St. Paul proclaims that God is patient with us so that we have time to repent, and Isaiah reminds us of God's gentle love: "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."

That quote will lead many musicians to choose “Like a Shepherd” for Masses this weekend, while the Baptist’s call is echoed in several Advent songs.

Planners should resist the temptation to use Christmas songs during Advent, even though they are being played in malls and street corners and on the radio and in Christmas concerts throughout December. We cannot control secular society (there is no point in berating people for commercializing Christmas), but we should be faithful to our own tradition in keeping Advent as a time to prepare. Let Advent be Advent! We need the time to prepare for the actual feast of Christmas.

If you didn’t have a penance service last week, today’s Scripture texts could be used to shape one for this week. Try to find ways to invite people to gather for reconciliation, as a time to prepare their hearts for Christmas but also as a time for joyful thanksgiving for God’s constant mercy. I suspect that our success in helping people appreciate this sacrament properly will advance in direct proportion with people coming to really appreciate God’s constant mercy and love. In the midst of all the pre-Christmas rush, invite them to gather for an evening of reflection and prayer leading to reconciliation and peace.

Planners might remember that Advent is a good time for lament. Lament is a common theme in the psalms. Prayers of lament complain to God about the evils and troubles we face and then ask God for help in dealing with them. That could be a simple format for the petitions this weekend. Identify current problems and concerns and present them to God to seek divine assistance.

If your community is used to varying responses to the petitions, either half of today’s psalm response might work well: “Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.” You could even sing the whole refrain as a response. Musicians might also look for songs that cry out for God’s justice and peace, like “O Come Divine Messiah” or “Comfort, Comfort, O My People” or “Come, O Long Expected Jesus.”

## **Prayers: 2nd Sunday of Advent**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Today’s readings urge us to prepare for and be open to God’s presence in our lives. We have been taught that this presence is ongoing, yet it doesn’t always seem so.

We need to work to overcome fear and doubt, especially in challenging times, but the task need not be a frantic effort. These readings carry warnings and longings, but the operative words are comfort, tenderness and hope. We wait and prepare because of the promise.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you were promised in times of great turmoil: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you were foretold by John the Baptist: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to prepare for your coming into our lives: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray for and await God's loving presence to all who are in need of comfort.

**Minister** For the whole church, that we may be open to God's loving, tender presence in our lives ... in hope and anticipation, we pray

- For all people throughout the world whose lives need a gentle sign of tenderness or comfort ... in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For the will to shower compassion and loving kindness upon those we judge to be different or difficult ... in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For those who believe God has abandoned them, that they may find reason for God's promise of newness and life ... in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For healthcare workers and social workers, counselors and pastors and all who work to provide comfort to those in need ... in hope and anticipation, we pray
- For a spirit of quiet hope in this community, especially among the sick, the dying and the grieving ... in hope and anticipation, we pray

**Presider** Gentle, yet powerful God, we need the comfort that you alone can bring. In these challenging times that often cause fear and anxiety, let us not lose sight that you are with us. Bless us as we look for your presence amid all we experience during this holy season. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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