

Commentaries **2nd Sunday of Advent: Year B**

Introduction

Advent is really a season in two parts, with the 1st two weeks concerned with the Lord's coming as Judge of all at the end of time and the 2nd two weeks serving as the proximate preparation for His coming in the flesh. Our activities, like the Church's readings, should reflect that dual character. ~ St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study Program

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. ~ Dr. Brant Pitre

1st Reading: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

The prophet Isaiah spoke words of encouragement to his people who would be in exile years after Isaiah prophesied. He wrote "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God." Isaiah lived and wrote around 750 B.C., Israel (the Northern Kingdom) was deported in 722 B.C. and Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was deported in 605-586 B.C.) Cyrus of Persia began defeating the Babylonian armies in 538 B.C. The prophet points out the hope (which was later realized) that under Persian rule the Jewish people may be returned to their homeland (Isaiah 44-45). They will build "a highway for our God." In this "highway builder" role they will be preparing the way for their Lord. In the gospel reading we will study today, Mark quotes this passage from Isaiah in introducing John the Baptist. As Christians we are also called to be highway builders preparing the way for Christ to enter more fully into our lives. We are proclaimers of "glad tidings." During the time of Isaiah, conquered peoples were often put to work building roads for the victors. In the process of road building they would be filling in the valleys and cutting down the high places to make the road smoother. Sometimes roads would be built especially for the victorious ruler to ride in triumph. This would become the "king's way." The Jews in Babylon dreamed of the day when they would build their own "king's way" back to their homeland. It would be Yahweh, their king, who would ride triumphantly at the head of their pilgrimage home. It is of this dream that Isaiah writes today in the beginning of the part of his book which is known as the "Book of Comfort" (Isaiah 40-55). ~ St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study Program

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a

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shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

The first reading provides the full context for today's Gospel because Isaiah 40 is the text that Mark himself quotes in our Gospel today. The exiled Israelites will be permitted to return home from Babylonian and rebuild their temple.

4 key things:

1. Prophecy begins with the future forgiveness of Israel's sins.
2. Prophecy of a new Exodus: "*make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*"
3. Prophecy of the Gospel: "*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings... the Lord God comes*" — "comes" = *adventus* is the root of this word = Advent. This passage shows that the subject of the good news is God himself coming to save His people from their sins and inaugurate a new Exodus.

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. ~ Dr. Brant Pitre

If God's glory is the outward "irradiation" of his inner goodness, as St. John Paul II tells us, then our deepest yearning is to share in this glory, to be penetrated and permeated by it, to have God's "glory dwelling in our land" (Psalm). ~ **Christopher West**

"The chaos of world history, with its cavities and hills — nothing but winding roads! — will in the end prove to be a straight and level path unto which God Himself has always been walking. When viewed from within this world, history seems to have followed a trajectory toward unforeseeable catastrophe; when viewed from its outcome, however, it is a safe and pleasant path home" ~ **Balthasar, *Light of the Word*, 151-2**

Responsorial: Psalm 85:9-14

- ⁹ Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- ¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- ¹² The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- ¹³ Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

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The responsorial psalm bridges the gap between the old and the new.

“his salvation is at hand” = theme. Why is his salvation at hand? The glory of God (his presence) will come and dwell with us.

“make a path for his steps” = Jews interpreted this as a reference to the Messiah, “the footsteps of the Messiah.” You can hear him coming...

2nd Reading: 2 Peter 3:8-14

The epistle readings of Advent focus on life in the interim time between the resurrection and the fulfillment of the reign of Christ. We live in semi-darkness until the light of Christ dawns more fully in our lives. But we must live as if the lights will come on in their highest intensity at any moment. ~ St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study Program

⁸ But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰ 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 everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.

“day of the Lord” = this was an early Christian expression for the end of time or the final judgment.

“heavens will pass away” = this was a 1st century Jewish idiom. Heavens and earth refer to entire cosmos, the visible, material world.

“dissolved with fire” = this is not a destruction like the flood, but a purifying fire in order to make all things new, a new heavens and a new earth.

“Since it is written concerning the day of judgment that a thousand years will be like one day, who can tell whether we shall spend days, months or even years in that fire?” [Saint Caesar of Arles (after A.D. 542), Sermons 179]

St. Peter calls us to **“peace”** — this peace prepares us for Advent.

Let us ponder the Christmas Mystery anew: this deepest of human desires is fulfilled in Mary! She is the “land” in which the glory of God dwells – *bodily*.... This is why God took on flesh: to reveal “the glory of the Lord” so that “all people shall see it together.” But if all humanity is to see God’s

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glory, we must be “eager to be found without spot or blemish” (second reading), for only the pure of heart can “see God.” If purity is “the glory of God in the human body” as John Paul II expressed, then it’s an utter gift. It’s not something we accomplish on our own. It’s something we *open* to by “acknowledging our sins” and allowing our bodies and souls to be washed clean in the waters of baptism (Gospel reading). ~ **Christopher West**

Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

Our attention turns to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus. If we are to move toward the kingdom of God, we have to confront the way we live our lives. Judgment and confrontation are the seed beds of change.

“Note that Mark mentions nothing of the nativity or infancy or youth of the Lord. He has made his Gospel begin directly with the preaching of John.” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 400), *The Harmony of the Evangelists* 2,6,18]

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’ ”

⁴ **John the baptizer** appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

“**Good news**” = *Euangelion* (*eu* = good; *angelion* = message or news). We get the word “evangelize” from this Greek root. To evangelize is to share the good news.

Euangelion was also a technical expression used in the Roman empire to announce the birth of Caesar. Scholars found the “Priene Inscription,” an ancient Greek inscription from the Roman Empire around 9BC announcing the birth of Caesar Augustus.

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 (*euangelion*) that came by reason of him” ~ trans. in HCNT 1995, 169; cf. R. Hays, 2016, p. 92

Almost exact parallel in announcing birth of Caesar with Jesus, who were both considered King, saviour, and God. Since the Gospel of Mark is commonly believed to have been written for Christians in the city of Rome, Mark is immediately setting a contrast — choose Caesar or Jesus. This is a great example of how the Gospels must also be put into their Greco-Roman pagan context too. ~ Dr. Brant Pitre

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“John the Baptist” = 1st century Jews would understand John the Baptist in this Markan passage as not merely the forerunner to Christ but a prophet of the new Exodus in which God would save the Jews in a similar manner to the 1st Exodus 1500 years prior. The clue is found in the location of John’s ministry: (1) the wilderness — not in Jerusalem but rather in the desert like Israel during 1st Exodus; (2) the river Jordan — not in the pools in Jerusalem but rather in the river where the 1st Exodus ended (Joshua 3:14-17). The new Exodus will begin where the old Exodus ended. This is why all the people went out to be baptized and confess their sins. John is the prophet of the new Exodus.

“Since the Victim had not been offered, nor had the Holy Spirit yet descended, of what kind was this remission of sins? ... Fittingly therefore, when he had said that he came ‘preaching the baptism of repentance,’ he adds, ‘for the remission of sins’; as if to say: he persuaded them to repent of their sins, so that later they might more easily receive pardon through believing in Christ. For unless brought to it by repentance, they would not seek for pardon. His baptism therefore served no other end than as a preparation for belief in Christ.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 370), Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew 10,2]

“John, too, wears a leather girdle about his loins; and there was nothing soft or effeminate in Elijah, but every bit of him was hard and virile. He, too, certainly was a shaggy man.” [Saint Jerome (ca. A.D. 415), Homily On The Exodus 91]

“Neither repentance avails without grace, nor grace without repentance; for repentance must first condemn sin, that grace may blot it out. So then John, who was a type of the law, came baptizing for repentance, while Christ came to offer grace.” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (ca. A.D. 380), Epistle 84]

Prophet of “the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me” = John never uses the word Messiah.

“Coming” = *adventus*. This Gospel for Advent describes the advent of Christ in his public ministry.

“This world has grown into a spiritual wilderness where men can scarcely hear the cry “Prepare the way of the Lord.” This “voice” echoes in the midst of the swirling cacophony of the mass media, sandwiched between the news items that tumble over each other... The Baptist would have had a much harder time of it today than two millennia ago” ~ Balthasar, *Light of the World*, 151