

“Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Words from our 2nd reading today from the 15th chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans – sisters and brothers, may the Lord give to you his peace and his joy.

A few weeks ago, I pulled out this glass here for my homily and asked what you could tell me about it. Now, a glass like this is often famously used to talk about the difference between optimism and pessimism: some say half-full, others half-empty, some say truly the glass is completely full of both water and air, so you got me there, and indeed there are a whole range of opinions and outlooks on the subject matter. But I pull this glass out once again, because Advent is a season that is meant to shape our outlook on life on the basis of faith.

In the Scriptures of today, Isaiah is sharing the outlook that faith provides. “On that day,” Isaiah declares, there will be peace on God’s holy mountain. It will be a day when there will be no harm or ruin. Even the most instinctual and antagonistic enemies will be able to dwell together. People will be filled with the spirit of God who will lead them to good choices. Justice will flourish. Living in God’s ways will be awesome, glorious, wonderful. For a people who knew war, destruction, loss of jobs and homes, death, exile, injustice, abandonment of truth, and poor decision-making, after being completely ravaged by the Babylonian empire, the people of Israel could hardly wait for that new day to come! We also know for ourselves that reality is not always pretty, especially as we turn on the news, but when we stop dreaming of something better for ourselves, when we don’t believe that new life is possible, then we fall into despair and despondency and we give up. Isaiah was sharing God’s dream for his people, and this outlook prevented them from falling into despair. He was reminding the Israelites that even during troubles, life is still good, God is still looking out for us, and that things will get better besides. And as St. Paul reminds us, the Scriptures were written for *our* encouragement and endurance, so this outlook is for us as well. God promises something better for us too. So, the first thing that Advent does is it makes us a more optimistic people, but, as we shall see, that is not the only thing that it does.

Now, while holding the outlook that life is good and things will get better, what happens in the meanwhile if things don’t change or even get worse? One can eventually begin to wonder what vision they’ve been sold. Dreams can become illusions, cheer turns into bitterness, eagerness is instead replaced by resentment. The present struggles become something to outlast and happiness is pushed off until certain conditions are met, as we tell ourselves, “I’ll be ok when... when I get out of that job, when I get married, when I get divorced, when the kids are out of the house, when I have their success, their prosperity, their health, when I retire... Happiness is coming soon - I’ll be ok when fill-in-the-blank happens to me.” Well, then they become a victim to circumstance where everything that happens is someone else’s responsibility and stands in

the way of their current happiness. That is why in our society, we can sue when Macaroni and Cheese isn't actually cooked in 3 ½ minutes and hold others responsible for a past they weren't even alive in. This is where optimists are said to be naïve, and though others may not have had dreams, at least they are grounded and didn't crash. Well, there is a danger to optimism in this way, yes.

And that is why Advent also makes us a people of hope. Now, the virtue of hope like optimism maintains the belief that things will get better too, but hope looks at the present as the means by which that happiness is achieved. It is not an obstacle to be removed but grappled with, it is a test of character, a measuring stick, a means of growth... "Do your worst!" hope declares, for even if defeated, hope is not destroyed, as even setbacks become lessons and apologies become avenues. The journey towards happiness is no longer conditioned. The present becomes part of that same adventure, worth every moment so as to realize that goal and is grateful for the hardships and milestones passed along the way. Hope wouldn't have it any other way; indeed, there is no room for regret. Hope doesn't bury its head in the sand and wait for the future to come; it is not passive. Hope actively works with sweat, blood, and tears to make the impossible possible or dies trying. People with hope don't just wish for something good to happen – they have a concrete plan in which they act out of. St. John the Baptist in the Gospel is the beacon of hope and the complement to the optimistic vision of Isaiah, as he calls on people to work towards that reality of God's coming reign. John says, "Prepare the way of the Lord... produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance." It's not enough, John admits, to claim Abraham as your father. In other words, stop abdicating your responsibility. Don't just wish for something new to come about. This faith that is now handed down to you is a way of life, and it is up to you to walk in it if you would like to also inherit its promises. Let us act on our beliefs and do the work personally required of us to welcome Jesus when he comes. There are lots of opportunities in this time of Advent to prepare in our hearts the way for the Lord. Go to Reconciliation, look at the bulletin for our parish schedule of happenings, there are suggestions there for preparing our homes for Christ's coming. Hope requires that we act on these things!

Advent is a season of optimism and of hope. Although hope and optimism are separate outlooks towards the present and future, one isn't as nearly as beneficial without the other. Someone who is optimistic but without hope could think everything is going to turn out fine but have no plans to make it happen; or someone who is hopeful may work towards change but give up without the optimism that shores up their belief that their work is truly making any difference. Advent is a season of optimism and of hope - as the scriptures tell us - of encouragement and endurance, where we draw closer to the Lord, as He simultaneously draws closer to us. Come Lord Jesus, we have made ourselves ready to receive you. Maranatha.

Second Sunday of Advent

Lectioary: 4

Reading 1

Is 11:1-10

On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,
and from his roots a bud shall blossom.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him:
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
a spirit of counsel and of strength,
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD,
and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD.
Not by appearance shall he judge,
nor by hearsay shall he decide,
but he shall judge the poor with justice,
and decide aright for the land's afflicted.

He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.

Justice shall be the band around his waist,
and faithfulness a belt upon his hips.

Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall browse together,
with a little child to guide them.

The cow and the bear shall be neighbors,
together their young shall rest;
the lion shall eat hay like the ox.

The baby shall play by the cobra's den,
and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.

There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD,
as water covers the sea.

On that day, the root of Jesse,
set up as a signal for the nations,
the Gentiles shall seek out,
for his dwelling shall be glorious.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

R. (cf. 7) Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.

O God, with your judgment endow the king,
and with your justice, the king's son;
he shall govern your people with justice
and your afflicted ones with judgment.

R. Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.

Justice shall flower in his days,
and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

R. Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.

For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out,
and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor;
the lives of the poor he shall save.

R. Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.

May his name be blessed forever;
as long as the sun his name shall remain.
In him shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed;
all the nations shall proclaim his happiness.

R. Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.

Reading 2

Rom 15:4-9

Brothers and sisters:

Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction,
that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures
we might have hope.

May the God of endurance and encouragement
grant you to think in harmony with one another,
in keeping with Christ Jesus,
that with one accord you may with one voice
glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you,
for the glory of God.

For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written:

Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name.

Alleluia

Lk 3:4, 6

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths: all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mt 3:1-12

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:

A voice of one crying out in the desert,

Prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight his paths.

John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him

and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you,

God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.
Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees.
Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit
will be cut down and thrown into the fire.
I am baptizing you with water, for repentance,
but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I.
I am not worthy to carry his sandals.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
His winnowing fan is in his hand.
He will clear his threshing floor
and gather his wheat into his barn,
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."