

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

RCL Readings – Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; II Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85; II Peter 3:8-18; Mark 1:1-8

Seasonal Introduction. Advent is a time set aside for spiritual reflection and preparation regarding the coming of the Messiah. It's a time of renewed commitment to prayer, deeper reading of the Scriptures, and perhaps even some fasting—all in the context of getting ready. The question then is: what are we getting ready for?

Advent provides us a time to reflect and celebrate the first coming of the Messiah. In whatever way we choose to measure our lives, new beginnings are always opportunities to reflect, but they must also be a time to make plans—and for Advent, plans for how to live as we anticipate the Messiah's second coming. To comprehensively grasp and proclaim the Gospel, it is crucial that we embrace and affirm both of these significant events.

Common Theme. In the second week of Advent, it's traditional that we hear from John the Baptist and the Prophets. Jesus regarded John as the last in the line of the prophets.¹ The proclamation that John the Baptist delivers in the desert, like the other proclamations in this week's lectionary, is one of preparation—preparation due to the seriousness of the Messiah's coming and the utter need to repent. And where many of the prophets failed, the people of Israel listened to John's message—even hearing that a greater one would come after John, some of John's disciples immediately followed Jesus.² However, in today's culture, prophets are

¹ Matthew 11:11 is commonly misquoted as saying that John the Baptist was the greatest among the prophets. The actual quote is, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” Jesus linked John's ministry into the lineage of the prophets in verse 13 by declaring that, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John” and proclaiming John to be Elijah the herald of the Messiah. Zechariah, the father of John, had prophesied that his unborn son would be a prophet of the Most High in Luke 1:76. John is then confirmed by Jesus to be a prophet in Luke 7:26-28. Jesus was not the only New Testament figure to consider John a prophet, the Sanhedrin were very fearful of the Jerusalem populace who held the view that John was, indeed, a prophet (Matthew 21:26 and Mark 11:32). Interestingly John the Baptist appears not to have seen himself as a prophetic character, only the mysterious ‘voice’ of Isaiah 40:3. When asked by the Priests and Levites who he was, he declares he is not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet (John 1:19-24). The way we see ourselves, our callings and our ministries are not necessarily the same way God sees us. Many things can cause us to not see the calling the Lord has on our lives, including both pride and false humility, but that does not preclude us from actually fulfilling God's calling. Despite what John the Baptist thought of himself, he still performed the duty of Elijah and Jesus declared him to be so.

² The next day following His baptism, Jesus encounters His cousin John again, who declares Him to be the ‘Lamb of God’ (John 1:35-42). Amazingly, Andrew (a disciple of John) immediately goes and locates his brother Simon and says ‘We have found the Messiah’. In context, Jesus has not called His own disciples, nor performed any miracles, nor held any outdoor teaching events. Yet, from this one statement of John, Andrew concludes Jesus is the Messiah. John's preaching had elevated people's messianic

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

often seen as radical or even fanatics—which, unfortunately, often blurs the clarity of their message to those who hear.

Greek culture offered many amazing opportunities, technologies, and convenience (which isn't a bad thing). Greek culture was very attractive. But interwoven with their culture were beliefs and actions that went against the teachings of Scripture. Given our own consumer culture, the message of the prophets is still very much relevant today. How do we prepare for the return of the Lord and the coming judgment? Do we buy a T Shirt that says, "Jesus is coming, look busy" or will we earnestly heed the voice in the wilderness and prepare for His coming through prayer, obedience, and repentance? God is speaking, let us hear His voice.

Hebraic Context. Geography and theology are very often linked in the Bible. Events occur in specific locations that provide nuance, insight and meaning to the messages delivered and proclaimed in those places. For example, the desert features prominently in our readings this week. Why are things proclaimed in the desert and not in a more lush environment? The word '*midbar*' in Hebrew means 'desert'. The same consonants that form the word '*midbar*' מדבר also form the word '*medaber*' מדבר which is the Hebrew word for 'speak'. There were no vowels in Hebrew, thus '*midbar*' and '*medaber*' appear the same in Hebrew text. You would have to see the context to know which word is being meant in the sentence. Further, the root of '*midbar*' מדבר is '*davar*' דבר which is the term for 'word' and those three letters form the *shoresh* (root) that actually creates the verb, 'to speak'.

The connection between the desert and the voice of God is clear and adds nuance to our readings. Where does God choose to speak to His heroes? So often, He speaks to His people in the desert. Why? Perhaps the desert is a place free from distraction, a place free from the idolatry so often prominent in cities. Perhaps the desert demanded a dependence on God that neither city nor field required. In the desert we may hear God's voice just that little bit clearer. And so we see, in the Scriptures, that God sends His heroes to the desert. Moses goes to the desert, Elijah spends time in the desert, David escapes Saul in the desert, and Israel wanders through the wilderness. Even Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. How often do we find a quiet place and let God speak and work through our lives?

Isaiah 40:1-11. Our passage in Isaiah opens with words of comfort for God's people. God had just promised, in chapter 39, that Israel would be taken to Babylon in exile. So, with such gloomy prospects ahead, Jerusalem was in sore need of some good news. How is this comfort conveyed? Most translations render the Hebrew text of verse 2 as 'Speak tenderly to

expectation. During the late 2nd Temple period the title 'Lamb of God' was linked to the coming redeemer. Thus some of John's disciples became Jesus' followers upon hearing John's pronouncement.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

Jerusalem'. Literally the Hebrew reads **דַּבְּרוּ עַל־לֵב** or *speak (ד•ב•ר) to the heart*.³ The heart has always been the object of the Lord's attention. For example; Moses says to write these laws on your heart; we are to have circumcised hearts; David tells us we need clean hands and a pure heart; and the prophets tell us that God will remove this heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. One of the reasons for comfort is not only has warfare ended but sin has also been forgiven.

Isaiah 40:3 is then quoted in all four Gospels as the gospel writers, in unison, declare John the Baptist to be the voice in the wilderness (מַדְבֵּר) preparing the way for Jesus the Messiah.⁴ However, the gospel writers are not the only first century Jewish group to use this passage in a similar way. During the Hasmonean period (around 150 years prior to Jesus) a number of disgruntled priests broke off from the Temple in Jerusalem and went to reside in the desert around Qumran. They had concluded that the Maccabean monarchs had become corrupt and had polluted the Sanctuary. In the wilderness, next to the Dead Sea, they committed themselves to the study of Scripture and to the preparation for the Messiah. Why did they choose to leave Jerusalem to move to the desert? Something in Isaiah 40:3 drew them to the dry and desolate places. In Biblical Hebrew there are no punctuation marks such as commas or full stops. How you punctuate the sentence in the Scriptures can make an important change in meaning. Isaiah 40:3 reads: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." A common reading of this verse places a coma after wilderness. Thus the 'voice' is said to be calling 'in the wilderness'. However another reading of this text places the coma after the verb 'calling'. Thus the verse implies that it is 'In the wilderness [you should] prepare the way of the Lord'. The Dead Sea Community read Isaiah 40:3 this way and went to prepare for the redeemer in the wilderness!⁵ John the Baptist has a similar reading and his proclamation brought people into the desert to be baptized as part of the national preparation for the coming redemption. It is not only through hearing the voice of God that brings us to repentance and redemption, it is also in going, often out of our own way, that helps us hear and obey.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13. Psalm 85 is attributed to the sons of Korah who, according to the title of the Psalm, prepared worship material for the 'chief musician'. The history of the sons of Korah is an excellent example of redemption, forgiveness and inclusion back into the family of God. Korah was a levite during the wandering in the wilderness whose tasks included the carrying of the Ark

³ One of the differences between the Hebraic and Greek perspectives is the location of the intellect. In Greek thinking the centre of thought, motivation, direction and intellect is located in the mind. Whereas in Hebrew it is in the heart. The command in the Hebrew Scriptures to love God with all your heart, soul and strength is later rendered by the Greek Septuagint with the addition of the word 'mind'.

⁴ Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; and John 1:23

⁵ 1QS 8:12-14, "... And when these become members of the Community in Israel according to all these rules, they shall separate from the habitation of ungodly men and shall go into the wilderness to prepare the way of Him; as it is written, prepare in the wilderness the way of ..., make straight in the desert a path for our God"

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

of the Covenant when the community moved. Korah joined in the rebellion against Moses, earning the wrath of God, with the earth swallowing the rebels. His descendants did not follow in their fathers rebellious footsteps⁶ but returned to faithful service in the Temple as worship leaders.

In the opening two verses the land and the people are paired together.⁷ God will show favour to the land of Israel while restoring the people through the forgiveness of sins in conjunction with an end to exile. Relationship to the land of Israel is a huge part of Israelite culture and sacred history. It should be no surprise these themes emerge in the prayer life of the Jewish people. The psalm sends a message of hope that, for the people of God, salvation is near, and that the Lord will come and dwell in the land. From verse 8, the psalmist expresses the desire to submit to the Lord. He does this by hearing God speak (דְּבַר יְהוָה). To do anything else, as the psalmist says, would be a return to folly. Repentance brings a renewed and restored relationship with God which includes His presence. The Lord's presence once more in the land brings further blessings. Loving kindness and truth are paired with righteousness and peace, which poetically meet together with passion, described in the psalm as a kiss. Truth, sometimes translated as faithfulness,⁸ even springs from the earth as concurrently righteousness descends from heaven.

⁶ Numbers 16:20-24, 31-33 may not directly tell us the story of the son of Korah, but it does provide information that makes it clear that the sons of Korah went against all traditions and family ties in their obedience to God. "And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods." The children of a patriarch belonged to the patriarch. In order for the children of Korah to survive, they would have, in front of the whole assembly, had to disgrace their own father—breaking the fifth commandment in the eyes of their peers and family—by physically walking away from him in order to live. (Numbers 26:11, "But the sons of Korah did not die.")

I Chronicles 6:31-48 gives us the lineage of the sons of Korah, which includes both Heman (who was famously wise according to I Kings 4:31 and the writer of Psalm 88) along with his grandfather, Samuel the prophet. Heman, the son of an evil man (I Chronicles 6:33) and descendant of someone who rebelled against God, could look at his history and know that, by all custom, laws, and convention, he should have been swallowed by the earth and descended into sheol. Instead, he was able to proclaim the salvation of the Lord each day at the gates of the Temple. This history of the sons of Korah influenced the majority of their Psalms.

⁷ Throughout the Scriptures Israel is described as both a land and a people. A significant part of the identity of the Jewish people is through the ancient connection with the land of Israel. From the beginning of Abraham's calling to the monotheistic faith, ultimately to be a blessing to the nations, involved the leaving of one land to go to another land. (Genesis 12:1) The spiritual well-being of the people of Israel is often connected to the health of the land by the prophets and in the prayer life of the Jewish people in the psalms many times. (Deuteronomy 6-11) Jesus also has a connection to the land as part of His Jewish identity as a literal descendent of Abraham.

⁸ Many translations interpret truth (אמת) as faithfulness (אמונה) here. While they have a similar shorash (root), truth is a better interpretation and is also how the LXX translated it (αληθεια). However, both interpretations convey similar meanings as faithfulness is the action of being true or steadfast.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

The psalm concludes with an exhortation for preparation. In this case, it is righteousness that descends from heaven that prepares the way for the Lord. The exhortation to prepare comes from heaven. Our response, from the earth,⁹ to that call brings blessing of truth, mercy and, above all, the presence of the Lord.

II Peter 3:8-15a. 'With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day'. The point of this quotation from Psalm 90:4 is to highlight that God is outside of time and

⁹ Three things meet in Psalm 85:10-11 (11-12 in the Hebrew). First is steadfast love and truth. A very common phrase that appears together 25 times in the Tanakh. If we have mercy God will be true and if we are true God will have mercy. Righteousness and peace kiss. If we are righteous (often interpreted as charity) then peace will come. And if we are at peace, God will be charitable.

The third is that truth and righteousness meet—truth springing up from the ground while righteousness looks down from the heavens. We know that God looks down (יִקַּח) in judgment—first in Genesis 18:16 and 19:28 the angels and then Abraham looked down to see Sodom's fall; more explicitly, in Exodus 14:24, the LORD looked down on the army of the Egyptians. In Psalm 14:2 and 53:2 God once again looks down to earth to see if any seek after Him. But God also looks down in mercy. Psalm 102:19 states that God looks down and hears the groaning of the prisoner while in Deuteronomy 26:15 Israel is to pray that God would look down on them and bless His people. (As we have seen earlier, the blessing involves Israel, the people, directly with the land that God had promised them—the land flowing with milk and honey. Even as Psalm 85:12 also includes the land as part of God's blessing for doing what is good.)

But what of truthfulness springing from the earth? Is it of God? Of men? Of Israel? Truth and righteousness appear together in several different contexts:

I Kings 3:6, Solomon declares that God showed great benevolence towards David in response to David's truth and righteousness. Here David is true and righteous.

Isaiah 48:1 declares that Israel are deceiving themselves. They call on God, but do so without truth or righteousness. Here a nation is neither true nor righteous.

Jeremiah 4:1-2 declares that Israel can return. They can call on God, but this time in truth and righteousness. Here a nation is called to be true and righteous.

Zechariah 8:8 speaks of God bringing His people [back] to Jerusalem to renew the purpose of the Exodus—that Israel would be God's people and God would be their God in truth and righteousness. Here God is true and righteous.

The first time we encounter something wishing to sprout (יִצְמַח) up from the ground is in Genesis 2:5. No plant could spring up from the earth for God hadn't sent His blessing, His rain, to the earth. Isaiah 45:8 makes it clear that it is the LORD who created the righteousness that pours down from the heavens and the earth it pours down on. But Genesis 2:5 reminds us that the other reason no plant could spring up was that there was no man to cultivate the ground. Isaiah 45:8 also states that God's righteousness and salvation should bear fruit and righteousness should sprout—So we get the picture that God and man work together. God is true and righteous, obviously we, as his people, are also called to be true and righteous.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

that God's time is unlike the reckoning of human time.¹⁰ The context is the expectation of the Day of the Lord and the return of the Messiah. Obviously the Lord does not work to the schedules of Man. Believers in the past, just as they do today, ponder the question of when is the Messiah returning and why has He not come sooner? Peter notes that God is providing enough time for the nations to come to repentance. Thus what appears as a delay in time for the return of the Lord is, in actuality, an act of love. Then without explanation, Peter declares that adhering to a lifestyle of holiness can actually hasten¹¹ the return of the Lord (verses 11-12). In Jewish thought, repentance hastens the coming messianic age. Peter presents classic Jewish tension. God delays His return, as verse 10 declares it to be a day of wrath, fire and destruction, coming as a thief unbidden and whose timing is unknown, yet at the very same time it seems there are implications that the body of Messiah can hasten His coming, through repentance.

Mark 1:1-8. Mark's gospel begins, without any introduction, in the desert which is, as we have already shown, to be the place for preparation for the Messiah. John the Baptist, like the prophets before him, comes to prepare the way, doing so in the wilderness, the place of

¹⁰ The interaction of God with time is simultaneously simple, almost all orthodox theologians will agree that God created time even as He created the world, but also incredibly complicated as we, beings created in time, cannot understand what it would mean to be without time or outside of time.

We know that God interacts with time, He rested on the Seventh Day. How does that work? No matter how many theologians argue, and they will—Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Book XI, chapters 7-31 and *City of God*, Book XII, 14-16; Saint Gregory's *Against Eunomius* Book I, Chapter 26 and dozens of other early fathers, church historians and modern theologians—we won't be able to understand it fully.

But Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, is quoted here by Peter to make a practical argument as much as a theological argument regarding all the promises of God. Even though Peter himself saw so many of God's promises fulfilled in his own lifetime—promises that, in some cases took almost 2,000 years to come to fruition—there were still more promises that God had made that have yet to be fulfilled. We, as people born in time, understand that our own time is short. 2 Baruch 48:12-14 (written shortly after the fall of the 2nd Temple) states similarly to Moses, "We are born in a short time, and in a short time we return. With You the hours are like the ages and the days are like generations. Be, therefore, not angry at man because he is nothing..."

¹¹ Peter is describing a classic Jewish tension: on one hand God is outside of time and His dealings with His creation are not scheduled to the desires of mankind and on the other hand humans can actually affect God's timing through their actions in having dominion over the world. Human actions that can hasten the redemption are explained through the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* תיקון עולם 'repairing the world'. The term is first used in Mishnah Gittin 4:2 in the Babylonian Talmud, in which Rabbi Gamaliel issues a decree to limit opportunities for divorce for the sake of 'tikkun olam' or healing the world. 1 Peter 3:7 notes that dysfunctional relationships between husbands and wives can also 'hinder your prayers'. It is the Hebraic perspective that human behaviour has an effect on the spiritual world and vice versa.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

messianic expectation.¹² Mark boldly gives Jesus the Messiah the added title 'Son of God'. In Hebrew and in Aramaic the term "son of" can refer to the biological relationship or a family dependency of some sort. It can also have another meaning rooted in a relationship of identity outside of a biological family. Angels are called 'son of God'¹³ because they are in a special relationship to God. Israel is called a son of God¹⁴ due to her special relationship and we are all called sons of the living God¹⁵ through the Messiah. Jesus has a very unique special relationship to the Father and so He also is called the Son of God.^{16,17}

John's message in the wilderness was not one of prediction of when the Messiah would come, but rather one of warning that he was coming soon. The call to prepare has an element of warning. For example in Matthew 3:12 John the Baptist warns that, 'His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor', implying that when the Messiah arrives He will start the eschatological judgment of the world. The looming judgment adds impetus for the call to prepare and the way that you prepare for the Messiah is to repent. Mark's gospel notes that John's preaching included the call for a 'baptism' of repentance. Repentance did not only occur

¹² The other place of great messianic expectation was the Temple. According to the prophet Malachi, the Messiah was going to suddenly appear in the House of God. As it is written in Malachi 3:1 'The Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to His Temple'. This was fulfilled when Joseph and Mary presented the baby Jesus in the Temple to Simeon (Luke 2:22-32).

¹³ Job 1:6, 2:1 and 38:7 appear to be references to the angels. Some will argue that Genesis 6:2 is also a reference to Angels. While many translations interpret Psalm 29:1 and 89:7 (Hebrew, 89:6) as speaking of the angels.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 14:1, "You are the sons of the LORD your God." Psalm 82:6, "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you...'" In Exodus 4:22-23, God tells Pharaoh that Israel is His son and Hosea 11:1 references this when God calls Israel his son. Judaism will also occasionally mention the righteous as "son[s] of god" (Wisdom of Solomon 2:13; 5:5). Adam is specifically called the son of God in Luke 3:38.

¹⁵ Other nations and people will also be called the sons of God. Hosea 1:10 (and Romans 9:26) along with John 1:12. We see this fulfilled in Galatians 3:26.

¹⁶ In Luke 1:35, the angel prophesies that Jesus will be the son of God to Mary. At Jesus' baptism, God calls Jesus his son (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22.) Jesus is called the son of God by Nathanael (John 1:49) and the author of John (John 20:31).

¹⁷ Son of God is not a direct declaration of Jesus' deity, rather his purpose and relationship. Greek mythology also included 'sons of gods' so the term would not have been unknown to Greco-Roman culture. Many of the deities of the Greek pantheon had children with humans producing the demigods such as Achilles. The difference here is that the only relationship described by the term 'son of god' in Greek thinking would have been a biological one and not a relational identity. Interestingly many of the Greek demigods had dysfunctional relationships with their god parents, whereas the relationship between the Father and Son in the Scriptures is one of love and mutual flourishing. When we read of the Romans referring to Jesus as the son of [G]od, it very well may be in this context (Matthew 27:54 and Mark 15:39). It's actually Jesus' title, "Son of man" that more intensely refers to Jesus' authority and power in Hebraic thought (Daniel 7:14, Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26, 14:62; and Revelation 1:7). However, this should not diminish the significance of Jesus' role as the Son of God.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Second Sunday in Advent – Year B

as a change of heart but was accompanied by a physical action of a baptism in water. The baptism preached by John was not only a baptism for individual sin but also a national message of expectation which involved a national repentance. Individuals had sinned and needed to repent but also Israel as a nation had sinned and needed to repent nationally. Hence Jesus, as a member of the Israelite nation, undertakes this baptism and joins in the national repentance. Jesus' baptism was not a baptism for personal sin as He Himself was sinless, but He was part of the Israelite people who had, indeed, sinned. John's message was quite popular as verse 4 says, 'the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him'. John's preaching created a sense of corporate expectation among the people. He was in every sense preparing the way of the Lord.

Hebraic Perspective. John makes a powerful proclamation that the coming one, the messianic redeemer, will baptize people in the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not a Christian invention, instead it actually has a long Jewish tradition. Within the context of our gentile Christian theology, we have come to understand baptism only as a one time event. Whether it is a sprinkling as an infant or a full immersion as an adult, baptisms tend to be a once in a lifetime occurrence. However, what did the Jewish listener to John the Baptist hear and understand when they heard of a baptism in the Holy Spirit? Baptism in the Jewish culture is understood as an immersion in a mikveh. A mikveh is a deep pool of living water, that is, the water is not stagnant but flowing—to be classified as 'living water' there has to be both an inlet and outlet to the pool of water. The water itself must not be manmade but come from heaven, usually rainwater. Rivers and streams are also acceptable.

It should be noted that there were various types of 'baptisms' during the 2nd Temple period. These included regular baptisms for ritual cleanliness, sometimes on a daily basis. Being in a state of uncleanness was not considered a sin. For example, you would become unclean through touching a dead body. So if you buried your father, which is a good thing to do, you became unclean though you had not sinned. To remove the impurity of uncleanness you would undergo a ritual baptism in a local mikveh. All worshippers (including Jesus) who wished to enter the Temple would undergo a mikveh before entering to remove any impurity and uncleanness. Bathing in a mikveh included being fully immersed in the water, so that the living water touched every part of the body. Important to note that, at the time of Jesus, most baptisms (that is, immersions into the mikveh) were not one time events. Baptisms were a regular occurrence in the life of the Jewish people in the late 2nd Temple period. Thus for Jewish disciples of Jesus to hear that they are to be baptized in the Holy Spirit meant to be fully immersed and saturated in the Spirit from head to toe. It was also something that could occur regularly and not to be limited to a one time event.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday in Advent – Year B



Overlooking the wilderness around the Dead Sea between Ein Gedi and Qumran

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday in Advent – Year B



Meditating in the wilderness at the cliffs of Qumran.

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