

Homily for the Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

December 4, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10 (A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse.)

Responsory: Psalm 72 (Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace forever.)

Second Reading: Romans 15:4-9 (Christ confirmed the promises of the patriarchs, but came to save the Gentiles, too.)

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12 (John the Baptist appears in the desert, preaching repentance.)

The prophecy that we heard in today's first reading is exactly the sort of image that we want during Advent. Isaiah describes the coming Messiah in ways that are both inspiring and non-threatening. The spirit of the Lord which rests upon God's anointed One will be "a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord." He shall judge *justly*, ensuring that the rights of the poor are upheld and the power of the ruthless to oppress and exploit the vulnerable is broken. This is how all of us would like to envision Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, especially during the Advent season. To make the vision even more idyllic, Isaiah imagines all the creatures of the earth being at peace with one another. Predators and their traditional prey lie down together and forage together in harmony. And, at the center of this new Eden is a little child, *the Christ child*, whose birth we look forward to celebrating in three weeks. Isaiah declares that in this vision there shall be "no harm or ruin" on all God's holy mountain, and he tells us why – "for the earth shall be filled with *knowledge of the Lord*, as water covers the sea." This *knowledge of the Lord* is the key. The coming Messiah will be a sign and a *revelation*, which brings that knowledge of the Lord to all the peoples of the earth – first to the Chosen People of Israel, and then to all the Gentile nations, as well. He will open *everyone's* eyes to see the peace and harmony that *God wills* for all peoples and for all creation.

That peaceful, serene image from Isaiah stands in stark contrast to today's Gospel. Before Jesus makes his first public appearance, he is preceded by John the Baptist, who cries out, "*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Wait a minute! What happened to the wolf being a guest of the lamb, and the calf and the young lion browsing together, and a little child guiding them? Why is John *threatening* people, demanding that they repent, calling some of them "a brood of vipers," and warning that some will be burned with "unquenchable fire"? Well, once again, the key is "knowledge of the Lord," or the *lack thereof*. If the earth had been "filled with knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea" when Jesus made his appearance, then there would have been no need for John and his baptism of repentance. All people would have been ready to meet the Messiah and welcome him into their lives. But, that was not the case. The earth was still filled with injustice and oppression and all manner of sin. That's why John had to come *first*, to prepare the way of the Lord, as other prophets had predicted. Yet, even John himself was very clear about the limits of his ministry. The *true* baptism, "in the Holy Spirit and fire," was still coming. The Messiah was going to offer something that John could not give, a baptism that *saves*.

This is the *Christian* baptism that we have received. As infants, the vast majority of us were washed in baptism and anointed with the Holy Spirit to “prepare the way of the Lord” to enter into our lives and remain with us forever. We received that gift early in life to help us navigate our way through a world that is far from idyllic. Not only are the wolf and the lamb not acting like neighbors, but even our fellow human beings often try to tear each other apart, as though we’re natural enemies, rather than brothers and sisters in the same human family. Clearly, knowledge of the Lord does *not* “fill the earth as water covers the sea,” or else people would not be acting this way. The Messiah has come, and he has opened the way to salvation, as promised, but his work is not yet done. That’s why John’s urgent call to repentance is still so relevant and so necessary, nearly two thousand years *after* the coming of the Messiah. This is also why Advent remains such a meaningful season for all of us in the Church. We *still* need to prepare the way of the Lord, so that he may enter more fully into our lives, our families, our communities, and our world.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, tries to motivate this mixed community of Jews and Gentiles to prepare the way of the Lord in much the same way that we do today. He wants them to welcome the Risen Lord into their Church, to bring all of them together as one. And, he encourages them to welcome *one another* as Christ welcomes all of them into his company and into his Kingdom. However, that task is made much more difficult by the fact that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians have come to their shared faith from very different places. The Jews were raised on the stories of the Patriarchs and the writings of the Prophets. Their ancestors had anticipated the coming of a Messiah for *centuries*, although his arrival still surprised everyone. The Gentiles, by contrast, did not know God at all until he became flesh and offered up his life for them. In other words, they knew Jesus as their *Savior* before they came to understand him as a promised Messiah. Hence, these two groups, reflecting on Christ’s coming into the world, glorify God for very different reasons. Jewish Christians glorify God for his *faithfulness*, while Gentile Christians glorify God for his *mercy*.

Of course, the Old Testament is filled with writings that extol both God’s faithfulness *and* God’s mercy. These are not mutually exclusive, but *complementary* understandings of Christ’s coming into the world. Hence, Paul can truthfully say that “whatever was written previously,” that is, *all* the prophetic writings which anticipated the coming of Christ, were written for our instruction and encouragement. For example, Isaiah’s beautiful vision of a world at peace, filled with knowledge of the Lord, can inspire us to imagine how our world, *redeemed by Christ*, could be *more* peaceful and *more* just than we presently experience it. Rather than looking upon our imperfect world with cynicism, God’s word can move us to dream of something better – not a pure fantasy, but the *reality* that God envisions for all of us someday. As we reflect on the gift of Christ and his coming, perhaps we can learn to view the world more as God sees it – as a beautiful gift, filled with hope and promise for all of God’s people and all of God’s creatures.