

## DECEMBER 10<sup>TH</sup>, 2017: SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 II Peter 3:8-14 Mark 1:1-8

The first words of today's first reading are some of Yahweh's most exciting biblical words. "Comfort, give comfort to my people says your God." It's the initial verse of Deutero-Isaiah's famous 16 chapters. Our faith has never been the same since the ministry of this unnamed prophet. Isaiah 40-55 introduces a whole new way of looking at God working in our lives, a perspective on Yahweh that can only have arisen during the darkest days of the Babylonian Exile. A new situation demands new insights. Fortunately, the prophet was up to the challenge.

Not only does Deutero-Isaiah announce an end to the 50-year exile, but the reason he gives for knowing it's finally over is the key to all his oracles. "The mouth of Yahweh has spoken." When any Israelite demands to know how he's certain they're going home, he simply responds, "Yahweh has given his word."

Though the Chosen People had known about God's word long before the Babylonian Exile, this particular prophet puts that word at the center of their faith. Once Yahweh speaks, it happens.

This emphasis on the power of God's word deeply affected later biblical authors. Scholars, for instance, are convinced the Priestly author of Genesis' first chapter had a copy of Deutero-Isaiah in front of him when writing his unique creation myth. Unlike Genesis 2, God doesn't get down on God's hands and knees and form man from the mud. God creates only by saying, "Let there be!" Quickly followed by, "And so there was!" God doesn't even break a sweat.

Without God's word, there's no creation.

Even the last writer of the Christian Scriptures, the unknown author of II Peter, falls back on that word. One of the few still holding out hope for Jesus' Second Coming in the first years of the second century CE, he assures his readers, "According to his (Jesus') promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." If he's said it, it's got to happen, no matter when it's going to take place.

But almost 100 years earlier, John the Baptizer, as a member of the Dead Sea Scrolls community, fell back on a "repunctuated" version of Deutero-Isaiah as assurance that Yahweh was soon to break into the Chosen People's history. "Prepare the way of Yahweh, make straight his paths," he proclaims.

Though we Christians believe John's speaking about Jesus of Nazareth, scholars tell us he has no inkling this simple Capernaum carpenter is actually the divine person he's looking for. After all, Jesus is one of his own disciples! How could someone so common actually be so special?

These same scholars are convinced the "put-downs" John says about himself in reference to Jesus were put into his mouth by Christians dealing with the fact that, in the beginning, John was actually better known and more highly regarded than Jesus. Followers of Jesus are the ones who believe, "One mightier than I is coming after me," not the Baptizer.

In some sense, the historical John's misplaced belief in Yahweh's word is simply an example of limiting that word to just the circumstances with which we're familiar and comfortable. The late Marshal McLuhan often encouraged us to go through life looking out the car's front window instead of constantly glancing in its rearview mirror. It's easier to encounter what's already been instead of what's going to be.

Even if we follow God's word, we must always appreciate it's a constantly evolving, constantly new word. Change is an essential part of God's nature. No matter how we've understood that word in the past, we're now expected to deal with it in the present and the future.

Perhaps John the Baptist can demonstrate how best to accomplish that.

## DECEMBER 17<sup>TH</sup>, 2017: THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11 I Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28

Part of your remote preparation for today's readings might be to rent the 1998 movie *Simon Birch*. It's the story of a young boy with dwarfism who is convinced God made him for a "special heroic purpose." Though almost everyone – including his pastor – tries to talk him out of his fantasy, the ending of the movie eventually proves his conviction had been correct all along. Though the plot might seem somewhat "hammy," today's sacred authors certainly connect with it.

Paul states it clearly: "May the God of peace make you perfectly *holy*."

His community in Thessalonica understands that "holy" doesn't mean pious, describing the way you hold your hands or raise your eyes heavenward when you pray. Holy simply means "other," distinct from those around you, just as God is other from every other person around him/her.

One of the characteristics which makes us unique is the conviction that God has given each of us, like Simon Birch, a specific purpose in life. That assurance isn't an essential part of our personality just because we're followers of Jesus. As we hear in today's first reading, Third-Isaiah had that belief 500 years before Jesus' birth.

"The spirit of Yahweh is upon me," he proclaims, "because Yahweh has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners . . ." The prophet's life is consumed with God's plan to help the helpless. If Yahweh is going to bring the world "justice" – good personal relationships – that justice must start with Third-Isaiah's personal relationships with others, something he's convinced he's specifically called by God to carry out. It's a major part of his holiness.

According to the four Christian evangelists, with the exception of Jesus of Nazareth, no one in salvation history has a more unique purpose in life than John the Baptizer. He's the precursor of Jesus the Messiah. As John the Evangelist tells us in today's gospel pericope, he's the one who prepares the way for the one who comes after him, the one whose sandal strap he's not even "worthy to untie."

Yet as I always remind my students, scholars are convinced Jesus' first followers seem to be the only people who eventually believed this special precursor had that mission. Historically, John himself most probably never understood that to be his God-given role in life. It's possible he went to his death convinced he'd failed in his mission; to help people experience Yahweh in their daily lives. (Sound familiar?) I presume only after reaching heaven's confines was he finally able to put all the individual pieces together.

Holy people face a daunting problem; though they believe God's designated them for a specific purpose in life, they rarely know what that specific purpose is. Perhaps that's why Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they constantly have to "hang loose." While they're waiting for that purpose to show itself, they must ". . . in all circumstances give thanks . . . not quench the Spirit . . . not despise prophetic utterances." (The latter implies they must always be open to surfacing God's will in their lives.) Meanwhile they're to ". . . test everything, retain what is good, and refrain from every kind of evil."

Paul simply tells his community they're to spend their lives becoming other Christs; no one could be holier. Yet even in Gethsemane the historical Jesus argued with God about his purpose in life. If God's Son had to wait until Easter Sunday morning to definitely appreciate his life's purpose, who are we?

Most of us have at least a few more years to go.