

St. Mary of the Angels Sunday Advent I C 12/9/18
Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6, 8-12; Luke 3:1-6

My Brothers and Sisters,

As we reflect on the Gospel for this second Sunday of Advent, two interesting themes stand out: 1) The time and place, and 2) The message.

1) Time and Place is about the scene and the story.

Suddenly, here in the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent, before Jesus is born, we are fast-forwarded 30 years to after his birth.

Suddenly, we are presented with all the chief political and religious personalities of Jesus' active life and death. They are all named for us: Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysander, and the high priests Annas and Caiphas.

Suddenly, the full grown, thirty year old, John the Baptist comes out of the desert and places himself at the Jordan River.

The Jordan:

Here is the place where Joshua, some eight thousand years before, had crossed into the promised land that became Israel.

Here is the place where the exiles, some five hundred years before, had crossed when they returned from the Babylonian Captivity.

Now, for the third time, with a strange and striking prophetic figure standing at that special place of history and destiny, there seems to be a another call to a new beginning .

Even without ABC, CNN, Fox News and the Washington Post, the word is out there.

Everyone hears what is happening.

Ordinary people gather in expectation.

Civil power and religious power stand by nervously, fearfully.

It is hard for us to grasp the drama of the moment: the symbol of a prophet standing at the Jordan, with the consequent threat to power and hope for ordinary folk.

So, all eyes are focused on John.

All ears are listening to John's words.

All hearts are stirred with conflicting emotions.

2) And that brings us to the Message.

The message begins today and will continue next Sunday.
(So, come back next Sunday to hear the rest.)

The message begins with the words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” God speaks these words, not to us, but to his angels. It is for God’s angels to get to work.

Then, we are presented with those landscape images of low valleys and high mountains, of crooked and rough roads.

As we sang at our entrance hymn:

“Let the valleys be raised and the mountains made low,
Ev’ry meadow and field over turn.

Make the pathway straight, and the highway run smooth
For the coming of God in our day.”

You might say that God is laying the infrastructure for our salvation.

Always, with these words from Isaiah, I am taken back in memory and imagination, to my Advent time in Jamaica. Jamaica, as you probably know, is an island of mountains, the highest mountain being even taller than Mt. Washington. To traverse the island, one has to drive narrow, curvy country roads. In the course of the year, these roads become more and more narrow and dangerous as seasonal rains wash down mud and more mud upon them. But, then, in Advent, the government provides “Christmas work” for the country people. So, with pickaxes and shovels, the people get out and broaden the roads to make them safer again.

This is what God wants his angels to do: open up safe roads. But, for whom? It seems so that God can come to us more easily.

Our opening hymn spoke of “the coming of God in our day.”

Later, we will sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” Another favorite Advent hymn is: “Come, O long Expected Jesus.” And, in “People, Look East,” don’t we say, “People, Look East and sing today, Love the guest is on the way?” And always:

“Maranatha” “Come, Lord Jesus.” I think that we see Advent as a time of waiting and watching for God in Jesus to come to us as our Lord and Savior. And we are to prepare ourselves to be ready for his coming.

But, might it not be the other way around, that it is God who is waiting and watching, for us to come? Are we called, like the Magi, to be already on the way, to be on the journey, now, so that we might arrive in time for Jesus’ birth? What might our coming look like? St. John the Baptist will say more in next Sunday’s Gospel, but, for now, we might ask God and God’s angels to show us how we can help them smooth rough roads, raise valleys and lower hills.

We all have rough roads of resentment for hurts, past and present. Might we not smooth them with forgiveness?

We have all lived in the valley of violence this year, both physical and emotional, and have been poisoned in the toxic valleys of national politics, church scandal, and global warming. Might we not pray more intentionally that the Spirit of God breathe more life-giving decisions?

And, perhaps we have been stuck on the hills of helplessness, where we felt situations so overwhelming that we did not do our part to lower and lessen the burdens of others. Might we not reach out to help someone in need this Advent season?

So, is God coming to us or are we to come to God?
Maybe the best image is that we are both coming to one another.
God is surely coming to meet us. Are we as eager to come to God?

This coming together of God and us actually takes place in each Eucharist. Jesus as risen Lord comes to us in the transformed bread and wine on the altar. Then, we, with cupped hands, come to receive him in the Eucharist. Together, in the meeting, we become, wonderfully and miraculously, the one body of Christ – Emmanuel.

Let the Advent journey, then, continue joyfully, both God’s journey and our journey, as we come closer once again. Then, more joyfully, will we celebrate our meeting and oneness on Christmas Day.

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Brighton, Mass. 12/9/18