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December 9, 2017

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Today is the second Sunday of Advent. What's the line that sticks with you? Is it "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" or "Every valley shall be exalted"? That might be the test of whether you are more a fan of "Godspell" or Handel's "Messiah." Those two show us how popular culture picks up on Scripture and brings it into mainstream consciousness. (Yes, Handel started out as part of 18th-century popular culture.) Once we get out of the realm of music, those two lines could summarize the message of this second Sunday of Advent.

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

Psalms 85

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

[Full text of the readings](#)

"Prepare ye the way!" What's the call in that? John the Baptist, one of the Christian Scripture's most colorful characters, got people's attention with that message. We quote him as saying "repent," but the word he used wasn't quite so puritanical. John didn't call for self-incriminating scruples but for a radical open-mindedness. The Greek word is *metanoia*, coming from *meta* which means "beyond" and *nous* which refers "to the mind." Thus, *metanoia* can be seen as a call to go beyond our typical or "normal" mindset. It speaks of a change in our vision of life that will bring about a transformation of the way we live.

The Gospel tells us that everybody was flocking to John at the Jordan to confess their sins and go through John's cold-water, cleansing dunk. If we imagine that scene with the excesses of crowds and enthusiasm Mark describes, we will get quite a picture. The crowd's confession of sin wasn't at all what we think of as a recitation of transgressions — and there was nothing private about it. It was a communal and enthusiastic public demonstration in which groups of people got excited about the idea that life could be much better than it was. Their confession said, "We've settled for less, but no more!"

The corollary to that confession, what brought it about and what it was intended to lead to, was a dream about how things could be. Isaiah offered people a vision of a world without the divisions and barriers symbolized by valleys and mountains. Everything that plagued people, families and nations would be smoothed out. The whole world would see how good God is. All peoples would learn that the power of God is the power of love, that God enters history not as a warrior but like a shepherd.

Mark doesn't spell out John's version of that dream in the ways that Matthew and Luke do. Mark cuts to the quick and says John preached three things: repentance, forgiveness and the coming of one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Mark often gives us the Cliffs Notes version of the Gospel, an approach that challenges us to spell out the details in the ways most appropriate to our own time and place.

This year, the second Sunday of Advent comes exactly in between two great feasts of Mary: the Immaculate Conception and Our Lady of Guadalupe. The feast of the Immaculate Conception celebrates Mary as the first one redeemed by Christ; we might think of her as the first fully human person in history, the one who fulfilled all her potential as a child of God, a fully self-giving collaborator with the plan of God. The feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe brings the Gospel message uniquely home to the Americas. In celebrating *La Morenita* (as she is fondly called in Spanish-speaking cultures), we celebrate the fact that the Incarnation implies inculturation.



Members of the Eco Spirits ministry at St. Joan of Arc Church, in Minneapolis, detail their zero waste efforts at the annual Cabaret fundraiser in this video. (Jeffrey Grosscup)

Just as the word took flesh in the first century, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a visible image of Christianity's ability to express itself in the signs and symbols, the language and culture of every people on earth.

The second Sunday of Advent invites us to a meta-dream. Isaiah and the images of the Blessed Virgin give us a vision of what life can be like. We are created with the potential to share divine life, to share the joy of being part of a humanity at peace, smoothing out what divides us and rejoicing in the multiple ways our different cultures can incarnate the love of God. We will never make it happen if we don't first imagine it. The call to repent is a call to let go of our puny expectations. The promise of forgiveness tells us that God will never condemn us to remain trapped in the selfishness we have chosen. There is always more possibility.

Finally, the promise of Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit tells us that we, like Mary, can be overshadowed by God and become bearers of Christ's presence in our world. The glory of the Lord can be revealed in us and among us. Let us open our minds and hearts and prepare the way of the Lord.

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[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is writing the history of the St. Joseph sisters in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org.

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 1-14, 2017** print issue under the headline: A meta-dream.