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by Mary M. McGlone

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“The word of God came to John ... in the desert.” That is what Luke said to introduce the prophet who would prepare the way of the Lord. According to Luke, John’s ministry was the pivotal point in salvation history; the new and final era was coming into being.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, unless we live in an area such as the Southwest U.S., the desert is probably about as far from our imaginations as a herd of camels. (Now you’re thinking about camels, right?) Luke wants us to think about the desert and why John was there instead of protesting around the palace or preaching in the Temple. (John eventually did the first; Jesus did the latter. The results are well known.)

The desert was Israel’s birthplace. God brought the people out of slavery and then led them on a 40-year desert trek to teach them what it meant to be the people of God. They needed that time to get over their servile identity. They lived those 40 years without the distractions of building homes and businesses; that long experience of being on the move taught them to rely on God alone. When they forgot the lessons of the desert, God sent them into exile for 60 years. In both instances, hardship stripped them of everything so that they could figure out what was essential.

We see something similar in the lives of people who suffer. A cancer diagnosis can force people to clarify the purpose of their life. An unexpected death reminds us that relationships are more important than any activity or achievement. A fire or flood often leaves people with a new sense of the relative value of their belongings. An accident often leaves us thinking about how we might have prevented it. All of the above adjust our vision in ways we probably never would have chosen.

So now in December, while everything in the northern hemisphere jingles with excitement about winter and holidays, the church invites us into the desert with John.

The desert is the antithesis of the mall. No matter how much money you have, there is nothing to buy. Far from the city lights whose twinkling grabs our attention, the desert allows us to fix our gaze on the stars, on beauty that is beyond our reach and yet seems to have been created just for our delight. The desert is where our soul finds room to expand, where we can remember what we really thirst for. This is the experience of God’s fertile desert. This is the desert we can choose when we want its blessing.

There are other deserts as well such as the desert of the U.S. southern borderlands where the poor wander, seeking something better as they bet their lives on a chance for peace and safety. There are deserts of loneliness in the midst of bustling cities. The internet allows us to contemplate the desert refugee camps where people spend hours waiting in line for water and years waiting for a welcome to a new homeland.

These are deserts of desperation, the sort that Israel knew in her exile. Today these deserts have been created by the selfishness of human sin and those who suffer in these deserts are not usually the guilty. The promise of today's readings, the promise of Christmas itself, is made for the people in these deserts.

The word of the Lord came to John in the desert and today he tells us to prepare the way of the Lord.

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we must straighten out the tortured paths that truncate our sisters' and brothers' hopes as they flee for their lives, seeking a safe haven. We are called to straighten out twisted communications with words of truth and sincere compassion, even for our adversaries.

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we need to muster the courage necessary to enter the valleys of depression and desperation that trap our brothers and sisters in loneliness and fear. In our personal relationships, we are called to build bridges across the breaches that have separated us from family or friends, to forget old wounds and bend low enough to say "I am sorry."

To prepare the way of the Lord today, we must reassess the mountains (and rivers) that create uncrossable borders between us as nations, parties, ideologies, genders, orientations, etc. Then, willing to see the beauty of the other side, we can descend from our heights of righteousness and let those mountains be made low.

There is a lot of geography to cover if we wish to prepare the way of the Lord. But it is all possible because God is already working on it.

BARUCH 5:1-9

Baruch was the prophet Jeremiah's secretary. He took dictation and sometimes preached. The book that bears his name was written long after his time, quite likely by a few anonymous writers. Those authors wanted to inspire people by the example of their ancestors who lived in a time of exile. The selection we use for this Sunday comes from the third part of the work, a proclamation of consolation.

The author is addressing a people contemplating their own ruin and impending death. They see that their nation has lost its identity and failed to live up to its ideals. They are mourning over what they have become, believing that they are captives of the godless and that it is their own fault.

In today's reading, "Baruch" gives his depressed audience a series of orders. He is pretty much telling them, "Take off your widows' weeds and put on your prom clothes! Stand up and act like a people who know who God is!" Baruch isn't playing Pollyanna or ignoring their situation. He knows that the current moral and political situations offer absolutely no rationale for positive thinking or great expectations. His realism and hope were like Charles Dickens' assessment, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... the age of foolishness ... the epoch of belief."

Baruch's people saw nothing that should have given them hope. That was precisely Baruch's point. Their only possibility for a future worth looking forward to would come from God's mercy and grace.

Baruch's promise to Israel is a compact version of the covenant with Noah, the promise and assurance that God desires life for humanity, not destruction. When Baruch tells his people to bear God's glorious name on their head, he is telling them to act like people with faith. He knows that they can discover only what they are willing to believe. If they choose to live in lament, they will always see reasons for their grief. If they seek the light of God's glory, they will learn to discern it and advance in joy.

PSALM 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6

Psalm 126 sings of the hope that comes from remembering God's past goodness. It is a song of faith in God's dependability. The first stanzas could remind us of a folk song passed from one generation to the next. It is a national

treasure that recalls the tragedy of the exile, the loss of everything and then the joyful return nearly 60 years later.

The second stanza sings in harmony with Baruch who promised that God would accomplish what the people could not. Israel's survival as a people of faith is one of the great miracles of history. Much greater nations and religious traditions faded away while Israel persevered in exile and was restored time and again. As the verses proclaim, there is no explanation for their survival except the saving will of God.

The third and fourth stanzas express the plea of any individual or people who have experienced ruin. It begs God to bring them back to their former situation. This petition makes sense only in the light of their historical memory. They are asking for a repetition of what God has done for them in the past.

People who enjoy the prosperity of a nation like the U.S. may have difficulty identifying with the sentiments of the psalm because we have little experience of anything like Israel's exile and eventual return home. While the nearly 400,000 African slaves brought to the U.S. could have dreamt of the joy of the repatriated exiles, the majority of our population has descended from immigrants who sought a better future in America. While our ancestors may have missed their homeland, the decision to leave was their own.

We may be tempted to sing this psalm blithely, as if we knew what it meant. That robs it of its meaning. There are at least two good options to that approach. First, we might prepare ourselves for this prayer by recalling how we have felt God's saving hand in our lives. Then, at the very least, we can be in tune with the refrain, "The Lord has done great things for us."

Another possibility is to pray this psalm in the name of our brothers and sisters who are going through experiences similar to the ones it describes. It will take courage and generosity to pray in the name of children separated from their parents, refugees who must flee their homes, or the deported who have lost everything. But if we do so, we will be in a position to learn what great, undreamt things God is ready to do for and through us.

PHILIPPIANS 1: 4-6, 8-11

Philippi, a Greek city named for the father of Alexander the Great, was probably the home of the first Christian community in Europe, established by Paul around the year 50 C.E. Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter, nearly a decade after first knowing the Philippian community.

The opening of the letter echoes the hope we have heard in Baruch. There is no doubt that Paul loves the people to whom he is writing and that he rejoices in their life of faith. As he tells them why he feels that way, he uses a phrase that the Lectionary translates as "your partnership for the gospel."

The Greek word for this partnership is *koinonia*, which can also be translated as "fellowship" or "communion." The Philippian community apparently expressed their *koinonia* through support of Paul and their way of living the Gospel. They lived *koinonia* in concrete action and a communal way of life that gave witness to their unity. When we combine that idea with Paul's later statement that he longs for the community with the affection (gut feelings) of Christ himself, we get a sense of the deep union of heart and mind Paul felt with this community.

We might say that Paul saw his Philippian community fulfilling what Baruch had called for in his writings. Paul saw them living their commitment in joy. He believed they were on the path through which their love, knowledge and perception would continue to grow as the key elements of their communal life.

The end of our passage makes an interesting connection between love and discernment. Paul indicates that love is the basis of discerning what is of value. That means that the good of others is the highest value to which one can aspire and becomes the basis of all other judgments. This is an alternate explanation of what Jesus taught about the law being made for the good of humanity (Mark 2:27).

Another point of connection between Paul and Baruch is that Baruch calls the people to act like a hopeful people of God and Paul assures his community that God who began good work in them will bring it to completion. Both of them encourage the community to believe in the possibilities God holds out for them.

When we ask what this means for us today, we might see Pope Francis picking up the theme where Baruch and Paul left off as he calls the world community to care for endangered creation. Baruch called the people to put off their hopelessness and Paul prayed that the community's love would increase "ever more." In "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," Francis all but begs us to believe that "Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home" and that "All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation" (#13, 14).

This combination gives us three strong messages of hope. One says, "Put on your party clothes!" Another just tells us, "Rejoice!" And Francis sums up its practical implications saying in effect, "Don't ever doubt it, by the grace of God anything is possible!"

LUKE 3:1-6

The Gospel of Luke really begins with these verses. The infancy narrative of Chapters 1 and 2 were a prologue that introduced major themes. Luke opened that prologue saying that he was writing an orderly history so that his reader, Theophilus ("Lover of God"), would "realize the certainty" of Christian teachings.

Luke begins here by naming seven historical figures who situate his story. The problem with his list is that no one seems to be able to defend its accuracy. And the reason for naming Lysanias of Abilene remains a mystery; he is hard to identify and does not come up again in the story. Giving us a clue about why Luke did this, Scripture scholar Silvano Fausti points out that, by naming seven people, starting from the largest world stage and moving to the center of Judaism (the inverse of the geography of Luke-Acts), Luke indicates that he is about to tell the story of fulfillment of history. Astute readers will note that not one of the seven characters on his list will play a positive role in the new history God was inaugurating at that moment. Luke packed a lot into that verse!

The next verse takes readers into the heart of salvation history. Using a formula familiar to anyone who has read the prophet Jeremiah, Luke declares that the word of God came to John. Luke makes a point of the fact that God's word was heard not in palaces or temples, but in the desert — just where Isaiah said it would be.

The desert was one of the most important places in Israel's history. The Exodus road to freedom went through the desert. The desert was the place where former slaves, a people who did not even own their identity, were formed into a nation. There, they entered a covenant with the very God whose call made them who they were. The desert was where the people learned to fix their hopes on God's future.

When Luke tells us that John preached throughout the entire region of the Jordan, Jews remember that river as the one they crossed at the end of the pilgrimage that they began by crossing the Red Sea. Luke introduces us to John at the heart of Israel and on her edges. His preaching announced a time newer than the one the people had known in the Exodus.

Luke presents John as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and the end of the first phase of history. Isaiah announced that God would come straight to the people. The valleys and mountains, traditional boundaries between people and nations, would be eliminated and all people would be God's people, worshipping in God's presence. In John's preaching, the mountains and valleys of inequality were what people would have to abandon in order to prepare for the coming salvation.

This Sunday's readings combine to give us great expectations. The stories of the past remind us that God's plans are always for our good. The appearance of John the Baptist tells us that great things are afoot. It is time for us to take our place in the story.

Planning: Second Sunday of Advent (C)

By Lawrence Mick

A quick read through today's Scripture texts might lead us to think this is Gaudete Sunday already — but that is a week away. The first reading speaks of God leading Israel in joy and the responsorial psalm picks up that theme. The second reading gives a reason for joy and confidence: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus."

Even though it is not yet Gaudete Sunday, these texts remind us that this whole season is one of joy, even if it is a muted joy.

The day of Christ Jesus (i.e., his second coming) has not yet arrived, so the Baptist challenges us to change our ways and prepare the way of the Lord. He proclaims a baptism of repentance and calls to us: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

So both joy and repentance mark this day. Those might seem contradictory until we realize that repentance leads us to joy. It is only when our lives are in accord with God's will that we find true happiness and lasting joy.

John's quoting of Isaiah about a voice crying out in the desert might link with these lines from the first reading: "The forests and every fragrant kind of tree have overshadowed Israel at God's command; for God is leading Israel in joy by the light of his glory, with his mercy and justice for company." While we humans have created vast wastelands and deserts around the globe, God holds out the promise of a renewal of creation to benefit God's people. We need to remember that all people on the planet are God's people. Planners might craft petitions that repent of our destructive ways and pray for the strength to renew the Earth so that its benefits can be shared by all people now and in future generations.

Wednesday is the feast of our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of the Americas. It is an important day for many Catholics of Hispanic background but it deserves to be celebrated by all Catholics. If you have a significant group of people who cherish this feast, invite them to help plan the liturgy and perhaps arrange a fiesta of some type after the Mass (maybe on Tuesday or Wednesday evening). It is an opportunity for all of us to recognize our multicultural background and to affirm and enjoy the gifts of Hispanic Catholics.

There are many Guadalupe prayer cards available online including one for justice by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). Search for "Prayer to Our Lady of Guadalupe for Justice" at www.usccb.org. It might be distributed or printed in the bulletin this Sunday in preparation for the feast day, as well as on the feast itself.

Prayers: Second Sunday of Advent (C)

By Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

God's word is a message of hope, and it has long been proclaimed in difficult times of exile, imprisonment and political turmoil. For those of us weary of dark news, the message may be a momentary relief on this Sunday. But do we believe it? What will it take for this word to settle deep in our hearts and even motivate us to take hopeful action on behalf of those for whom hope is meaningless? If not us, then who?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, your coming was proclaimed by John the Baptist: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you were a promise of hope even before you came: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be your voice for all who have lost hope: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now as hopeful people in a world in need of hope.

Minister For the church that we may be an unambiguous source of hope in the world, we pray:

- For those who have lost hope because of poverty, injustice or violence and for the will to offer hope supported by workable solutions, we pray:
- For those who endeavor to provide hope to others: family members and friends, neighbors and co-workers, teachers and counselors, therapists and spiritual guides, we pray:
- For those who diminish hope through selfishness, incivility or cruelty and for a spirit of repentance when we have violated others' hope, we pray:
- For forgiveness for all that we have done to harm the Earth for future generations, we pray:
- For the will to work for lasting care and sustainability for the planet, especially regarding the environment and weapons of mass destruction, we pray:
- For those among us who need loving support at this time and for those whose hope we seek to enliven through our parish ministries, we pray:

Presider God who does great things for us, we hear constantly that we live in dangerous times, surrounded by dangerous people. Fill our hearts with the same hope that filled the hearts of those awaiting Christ's coming long ago. Inspire us to keep hope alive for those who most need it. We make this prayer in the name of Jesus who is our sure and constant hope. Amen.

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