

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

December 9-10, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark: 1:1-8

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What is this world coming to?

I won't list all those things that keep us up all night with worry. But we humans often fail to honor each other's lives. Life' is not fair to the poor, the oppressed or the refugees. Where is justice?

This is not a new phenomenon. More than 500 years before Jesus, the people of Jerusalem and surrounding lands were experiencing political and social unrest. People had started worshiping other gods. Today, these "other gods" could be greed and power, or a misplaced self-reliance that negates God.

The prophets warned the rulers and the people to put God back into the center of their lives. One of those prophets was Elijah, who started his ministry in the wilderness—a visual and emotional symbol of a wasteland where there is little food to nourish the body, no community to offer security, no shade to protect one from the harshness of life. We liken this kind of wasteland to poverty of the body and soul. We also liken it to the burden and dryness of spirit that is caused from living in the world of sin. It is from this same kind of dessert wilderness that we hear about the coming of John the Baptist.

John is a mirror image of Elijah. Elijah who is best represented in 2 Kings, calls a whole nation, the whole church and all the people to seek repentance. Similarly, John the Baptist spoke a loud and clear message to the people—stop being so bullheaded and self-important and come back to God. He warned the tax collectors to stop taking more than they were allotted; they were robbing people. He warned the soldiers to stop the violence against people and stop being greedy.

John offers this opportunity through the action of a ritual cleansing by water; an immersion into the Jordon River, a chance to publicly proclaim that one is going to change one's sinful ways.

So, what would it take for you and your family, your workplace, your school, to take these words to heart? How are you going to clean house? How do you plan to prepare your heart and soul for the coming of the One who is true and loving and merciful?

This is not a task to take lightly, nor is it a short-term project to put on your calendar—although that's the first place to start. That's why it's called Advent! It's just the start. It's the beginning of a purposeful endeavor to be part of the peace-filled kingdom.

Let's look for some hints from today's scripture about what we could be searching for during Advent.

In the first reading Isaiah gives us an image of a tender and loving God, a good shepherd who is always ready to carry us when life gets too difficult. Isn't this the God that we search for?

The Psalmist suggests we look for a state of mind, a place of heart where "Kindness and truth shall meet: justice and peace shall kiss." What a beautiful sentiment. Look at each word: kindness, truth, justice, and peace. Doesn't your heart long for these realities?

Isaiah offers this visual treat: "Make a straight highway for our God! Every valley filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low." It makes me think of that passage through the mountains of Pennsylvania full of snow and fog when we make those family treks for the holidays. What if that path was flat and sunny? How I would long for that kind of road for my own life. How can I clear up the clutter of my own life, my own heart to make a pathway for God?

In the second letter of Peter we hear the instruction to "conduct yourselves in holiness and devotion." What plans do I have to attend Mass or to add prayer time to my life? What plans do I have to make some time for someone else? How can I be more present to my family? Where can I bring joy where there is no joy?

If you are able to affect any change in your life or the lives around you, your burden may be lifted, the loving shepherd will feed you and hold you close. Your heart will sing! Here is God!! Right here in my life! Right here in my heart! Right here in the crib that once was empty, I see the possibility of new life in the coming of the baby- Jesus!

