

December 10, 2017 Second Sunday of Advent

### **Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings**

While this is the Second Sunday of Advent, in some ways, at least for me, it only “feels” like Advent has really begun today, as we hear from the Advent Prophet Isaiah, and as John the Baptist appears on the scene in today’s Gospel. Last week, the Scripture Readings were still focused on what we sometimes call “the end times”. But this week, we hear Isaiah with that well-known Advent message (made popular by Handel in his masterpiece “Messiah”) calling out to God’s People who had been in Exile, away from their beloved Jerusalem for generations due to the Babylonian Captivity: *“Comfort---give comfort to my people....speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her service is at an end.”* In other words, they were about to return to their homeland----and a “new beginning”.

Speaking of “new beginnings”, our Gospel Reading today is from the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Listen again to the first 12 words of today’s Gospel passage: *“The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* Those 12 words are like a mini-profession of faith, which St. Mark makes at the very beginning, and then sets out for the next 16 chapters to unfold the details. He clearly and directly states that the Gospel is all about the Divine Person, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior!

But first, the stage has to be set, and that’s where John the Baptist comes into play. St. Mark quotes the very passage we heard in our First Reading from Isaiah: *“A voice of one crying out in the desert: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.’”*

When Isaiah first talked about that *“Voice crying out in the desert”*, that was part of the message of “comfort” and “hope”. For the Jewish Captives being held in Babylon to be able to return to their homeland, the Voice proclaimed that someone had to *“make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God.”* The valleys had to be filled in, and the mountains had to be made low---so that the People could easily find their way home to Jerusalem, and to their worship of their Loving God in the Temple.

At this time of year with the busiest shopping days in high gear, we might get an example of congested and difficult roadways when we run into bumper-to-bumper traffic on our main roads, such as the congestion on Westnedge Avenue

that runs through all the major shopping areas in our greater Kalamazoo area. With today's Scripture Readings in my mind, we could find ourselves longing for that "divine highway" that would allow us to rise above all the traffic and congestion, and find our way to our destinations without any delay.

Advent is about these wonderful spiritual realities of "comfort", "tenderness", "Presence", and of "Being Loved unconditionally by our God". And yet, at this time of year, as we deal with the realities of Christmas shopping traffic and congestion, we encounter just the opposite from "comfort" and "patience"; we deal with "traffic jams", "frantic running around", "deadlines", "sleepless nights caused by anxiety and stress", "short tempers", and all those other "voices" shouting at us with such messages as: "only 15 more shopping days until Christmas" and "you have to get your house decorated and your Christmas cards sent" and "you're not going to make it".

Isaiah's message of "comfort" is so much more appealing. We love our "comfort food", our "comfortable chair", and especially those "comfy jeans with expandable waistbands". Beyond food and clothes, we yearn for "comfort" and "tenderness" when we are dealing with difficult, challenging or painful circumstances in our lives. We **need** comfort. It feels so good when we experience it; and we also know the feeling when we don't.

This Advent time of "new beginnings" and "renewed hope" brings us that "comfort" resulting in knowing ---- believing-----and hopefully experiencing the Love of God for us in His Son, Jesus, Emmanuel----God's Presence among us. Advent brings us that "comfort" of knowing that we are valued, and we are not alone.

In today's beautiful First Reading, Isaiah continued the message of "comfort" by saying: *"Go up onto a high mountain....(and) cry out at the top of your voice....and say....: "Here is your God....Like a shepherd He feeds His flock; in His arms He gathers the lambs, carrying them in His bosom, and leading the ewes with care."* Can you imagine yourself doing that? Maybe not climbing a high mountain, but can you imagine yourself being so convinced that our God loves us---loves you---that you could cry out at the top of your voice: "My God is here---- He loves me and cares for me like a shepherd carrying me, one of His lambs, in His bosom"???

Advent is a time of new beginnings---it's a time to begin again. Just like the Gospel of St. Mark began with stating those 12 powerful words: "*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God*". We need to recommit ourselves to see that the Gospel---and everything about our Faith in Jesus---is the Good News by which we should be living our lives. We need to renew our love for, and faith in, Jesus, the Christ---to know Him, and love Him, and recommit ourselves to follow Him in our lives.

Can we, or will we, do that perfectly? As much as we might want to, we know from experience that we probably will not. We, unfortunately, will sin and wander off the straight and narrow path. But that's why we need to keep hearing the Voice of John the Baptist in our lives who keeps "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*"---of which we all so regularly are in need.

That's the Gospel. The Gospel is not a Book---it's not just a creed; rather, the Gospel is a **Person**. The Gospel, the Good News, is Jesus and His Presence that is real and never-ending. Jesus is present everywhere in the world through the Church. Jesus is Present to each of us here in this Mass in His Word, and in an incredibly special way as we will celebrate His Presence in the Eucharist and receive His Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

Christmas is coming. And yes, there's a lot to get ready for. But let's not allow the preparations for the glitz and the glitter, the lights and the carols, to detract us from the most important preparation of all---to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas that God has so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son to redeem us from our sins and to redeem the world.

Today's Second Reading from the second Letter of St. Peter is so important as we hear him warn us: "*Do not ignore this one fact, beloved*"....He goes on to remind us that the Day of the Lord will come like a "thief in the night". And then he asks us a very important question: "*What sort of persons ought you to be?*" The answer that he gives is that we should be "conducting (y)ourselves in holiness".

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ: We are in a new Church Year---a new Season of Advent---a new time in our lives. We need to listen to the "Voice" that calls to us and respond so that we can see--- hear---embrace---and follow Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God in all that we do, every day of our lives. That is how we

will “conduct ourselves in holiness”, and in the process, that is how we will find “comfort” in God’s unconditional Love.

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley