

Second Sunday of Advent

Year C



FIRST READING
Baruch 5:1-9

PSALM
Psalm 126:1-6

SECOND READING
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

GOSPEL
Luke 3:1-6

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PRAYER

Psalm 126:1-6

When the LORD
restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth
was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done
great things for them.”
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

READING THE WORD

First Reading Baruch 5:1-9

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor

everywhere under heaven.
For God
will give you evermore the name,
“Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.”
Arise, O Jerusalem,
stand upon the height;
look toward the east,
and see your children gathered
from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God
has remembered them.
For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God
will bring them back to you,
carried in glory,
as on a royal throne.
For God has ordered
that every high mountain
and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up,
to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely
in the glory of God.
The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God’s command.
For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,
with the mercy and righteousness
that come from him.

Second Reading Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

I constantly pray with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am

confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Gospel Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying
out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain
and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked
shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see
the salvation of God.' ”

HEARING THE WORD

“Forming a New Landscape”

The readings of this Second Sunday of Advent are rich in symbolic imagery of contrasting landscapes. These landscapes represent various human realities and responses to God’s transforming and salvific actions in the world.

The reading from the book of Baruch contains a song celebrating Jerusalem’s future restoration. Baruch was a secretary and assistant to Jeremiah. Baruch wrote his book for the Jews who had seen the destruction of their beloved city and who had been forcibly removed from their land. Our passage comes from the “Poem of Consolation to Jerusalem” (Bar 4:30 – 5:9) written to encourage and console the Jewish exiles in Babylon with images of restoration and salvation.

Baruch speaks to Jerusalem, the city that lies in ruins, as if it was a living being. He calls on Jerusalem to “take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction”, “to put on forever the beauty of the glory from God”, and to “stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east”. The lands where

the exiles lived were to the East of Jerusalem, thus, the city is to arise in joyful anticipation of the return of its inhabitants. This return is poetically described through a dramatic change of landscape. Thus, “God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys be filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God”. This reshaping of the landscape is a metaphor for God’s decisive intervention to vindicate and reconstitute his people. Israel’s restoration is God’s marvellous work. Baruch tells Jerusalem to rejoice upon the return of her lost children along the level path prepared by God, so that Jerusalem might teem with life again. These moving and beautiful images brim with boundless joy of confidence and hope. They would have been immensely inspiring to the exiles, as they assured them that God would use extraordinary means to restore his people.

The second reading contains Paul’s vision of the life of the Christian community in the city of Philippi. The Christian community in this city was the very first that Paul founded when he crossed from Asia to Europe (Acts 16:6-12). It was his “first child” on the continent, and his beloved community. Paul returned to Philippi several times and wrote his most affectionate and gracious letter to that community. Today’s passage comes from the introductory part of this letter, where Paul prais-

es his converts for their acceptance of the Gospel, and for becoming his partners in the mission of bringing the Good News to the world. Like a good father, Paul beams with great pride and joy as he acknowledges that believers in Philippi have been firm in the faith he brought to them. He also commends them for a remarkable and steady progress in Christian love and fellowship.

To further strengthen the Philippians in their convictions and faith, Paul makes an earnest and prayerful appeal which shows how he foresees the “landscape of their lives”. We must remember that most of the Philippian Christians were former Gentiles, whose lives had been very far from Christian ideals. Paul describes their new life in a five-fold way. First, it would be a life of growing love for one another. Love would be accompanied by knowledge, allowing the Philippians to discern God’s will. Purity and blamelessness go together, describing morally impeccable conduct towards God and others. Finally, it would be a life producing “the harvest of righteousness”, which is Paul’s way of describing the fruits of an intimate union of believers with Jesus and with the Father. Paul also prays that his converts would live on earth with a keen awareness of “the day of Christ” – the Parousia – which would focus them on the life to come. According to this vision, Paul’s Christians would indeed be a people whose daily existence has

been transformed on a very fundamental level. They would be a new creation, “a new landscape” among the human family.

The Gospel reading sets up a dramatic contrast between two very different landscapes. First, Luke names the Roman Emperor (Tiberius), the Roman governor of Judea (Pilate), Jewish secular rulers (Herod Antipas and Philip), a Gentile governor (Lysanias), and Jewish high priests (Annas and Caiaphas). This is a comprehensive list of the individuals who held absolute authority over an ordinary Jew living in Palestine at the time. This was the world of the most powerful, the wealthiest and the most influential people of the time. People who inhabited a world of opulent palaces, far removed from the conditions and concerns of the ordinary people under their rule.

A very different landscape emerges, introduced by Luke’s words, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Here, we move from the world of the people-made palaces to God-made wilderness. Wilderness is the place of testing, transformation and revelation, a place where people go to prepare themselves to do God’s will.

John the Baptist stands in the line of the great Old Testament prophets as a carrier of God’s message. He fulfills what his father, Zechariah, proclaimed in his great song of praise, stating the John would “give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins”

(1:77). Thus, John would not herald political liberation from the rule of all the authorities that Luke had previously named. Rather his ministry fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5 which defined him as the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord. Isaiah also stated that, “every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain”. This statement of Isaiah is remarkably like the passage from Baruch. Both foresaw the reshaping of the physical landscape as a symbol of preparation for God’s salvific intervention.

John’s mission was that of changing the landscape of human hearts by calling for repentance, and baptising people for the forgiveness of sins. These acts prepared the people for welcoming the Messiah, Jesus, who would come with God’s salvation. But before this salvation could be received, the people must turn away from their sins, which alienate them from God. John’s mission was intended to renew humanity, to prepare a new landscape, a fertile ground, where God’s salvation could take root.

Today’s readings graphically and beautifully describe a radical reshaping of reality and a dramatic change of landscape. Baruch portrays a city moving from lamentation to rejoicing, and from ruin to new life. Paul paints a picture of human life that has been utterly altered by reception and response to the Gospel. The Gospel

contrasts the landscape of power and wealth of the earth’s rulers, with the wilderness and a wild prophet. While the rulers would be concerned with maintaining themselves in power, John is concerned with reshaping the hearts of the people to receive salvation brought by God’s Son. All these images manifest God’s transformative power at work in the world, with an invitation to rejoice, but also to open oneself to God’s transforming intervention. This joy and challenge is well summed up by the psalmist who confidently states, “those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The experience of one seminarian is descriptive of a movement from lamentation to rejoicing. He had gone swimming with friends in the ocean, when suddenly one of the huge waves knocked him off and carried him deep into the sea. Faced with what appeared to be an imminent death by drowning, he uttered a shrill cry of prayer and then fell into a state of unconsciousness. When he regained consciousness, he found himself again at sea shore. He later discovered that someone had taken the risk to swim over and save him. Finding himself alive was like a dream for him, because he knew there was no way he could have saved himself. Indeed, his cry to God for help had literally been answered.

The people of Judah also felt as if they were dreaming, when the Lord chose to deliver them from their captivity in Babylon. The psalmist, pondering in retrospect over that event of salvation, wrote: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream."

The God who reshapes geographical landscapes is the same God who reshapes the lives of his people. With surprising divine interventions, God rewrites the history of individuals and communities, moving people from a state of hopelessness to hope.

The message of the prophet Baruch was intended to bring hope to God's people by revealing the Lord's decision to save them. God's ardent desire to save humanity, not only from political captivity but, more importantly, from spiritual captivity, is further expressed in the ministry of John the Baptist who preached a message of repentance, echoing the prophetic words of Isaiah, "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth."

It is true that our sojourn through life is not always rosy, and that no matter how bright the day is we cannot escape the night. Indeed, there are moments when we are up and then the next moment, we are down. However, the mes-

sage of Advent is that God will never allow us to remain in darkness, he will not leave us alone in the depths of the sea. The Scripture assures us of that truth and gives us hope. That hope sustains us because, as is powerfully stated in a proverb, "the hope of a sunrise chases away the fear of sunset." Even if we find ourselves in the dark valleys of life, it is hope that can fill those valleys and make our path smooth.

The power of God to save is real. It brings about tangible change in our lives. Advent is a season when we are called upon to reach for the grace of salvation that God is offering through Christ. It is the desire of God to do new things and open new chapters in our lives. The question is: Will we allow the Lord to save us?

PROVERB

*"The hope
of a sunrise
chases away
the fear
of sunset."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

How am I preparing the way of the Lord? What steps am I taking during this season

of grace to experience the newness of life that Christ brings?

Where do I look for hope when I enter the deep valleys of life?

Response to God:

In prayer, I reflect over my life and identify those areas where I am broken and stand in need of healing. I surrender them to the Lord in faith.

Response to your World:

During the coming week, I will read the book of Isaiah chapters 50 - 66, and see what hope and strength I can gain for myself from his words.

Since Christ came to save and his mission is our mission, we will decide as a group where and in what way we can offer help and hope to someone in need of it.

PRAYER

*Eternal Father,
your faithful love endures
throughout the ever-changing
landscape of life.
No matter what comes my way,
help me to believe
that you are always
able and willing
to form a new landscape.
In the time of darkness,
give me the wisdom
to look for the help and hope
that come from you.
Amen.*