

Gratitude Foundation



*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

The Second Sunday of Advent—Year C

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“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”

(1 Thess: 5:18)

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Reading I

Baruch 5:1-9

Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;
put on the splendor of glory from God forever:
wrapped in the cloak of justice from God,
bear on your head the mitre
that displays the glory of the eternal name.
For God will show all the earth your splendor:
you will be named by God forever
the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship.

Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;
look to the east and see your children
gathered from the east and the west
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that they are remembered by God.
Led away on foot by their enemies they left you:
but God will bring them back to you
borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.
For God has commanded
that every lofty mountain be made low,
and that the age-old depths and gorges
be filled to level ground,
that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God.
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.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.

R. (3) **The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,
we were like men dreaming.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with rejoicing.

R. **The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

Then they said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad indeed.

R. **The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the torrents in the southern desert.

Those who sow in tears
shall reap rejoicing.

R. **The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

Although they go forth weeping,
carrying the seed to be sown,
They shall come back rejoicing,
carrying their sheaves.

R. **The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

Reading II

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

Brothers and sisters:

I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,
because of your partnership for the gospel
from the first day until now.

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.

God is my witness,
how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer:
that your love may increase ever more and more
in knowledge and every kind of perception,
to discern what is of value,
so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God.

Alleluia

Luke 3:4, 6

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths:
all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,
and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee,
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region
of Ituraea and Trachonitis,
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,
the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.
John went throughout the whole region of 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:

A voice of one crying out in the desert:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight his paths.

Every valley shall be filled

and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

The winding roads shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Exegesis

Baruch 5:1-9

Baruch was known as a disciple and secretary of the Prophet Jeremiah. Whereas Jeremiah remained in the ruins of Jerusalem after it fell to the Babylonians in the early fall of 587 B.C., Baruch is writing from Babylon. “Now these are the words of the scroll which Baruch... wrote in Babylon... when the Chaldeans took Jerusalem and burnt it with fire.” (Bar 1: 1-3). Scholars disagree as to the authenticity of Baruch as the author as there appears to be at least three different sources involved in the book. The entire final chapter contains a letter from the Prophet Jeremiah. The dating of the materials indicates that the attribution to Baruch and Jeremiah would involve literary pseudepigraphy.¹ On the other hand, manuscripts from either Baruch or Jeremiah may have been assimilated by a later author.

Our selected passage is comprised of the entire 5th Chapter of *Baruch*. It concludes a section that begins in the 4th Chapter that is titled *Jerusalem Consoled: The Captivity about to End*. This section is introduced by the verse that immediately precedes it: “For He who has brought disaster upon you will, in saving you, bring you back enduring joy.” (Bar 4:29). The Israelites were not set free from Babylon until 538. If this passage was written in 587 then it was a prophecy that would come true approximately 50 years later.

The entire passage is a personification of the Holy City. She is to take off the robe of mourning and be enrobed with the robe of splendor and glory of God. She is to be wrapped in the cloak of justice from God and bear the miter on her head. The miter is a reference to the priesthood of Aaron. “You shall also make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, as on a seal engraving, ‘Sacred to Yahweh.’” This plate is to be tied over the miter. Since Aaron bears whatever guilt, the Israelites may incur in consecrating any of their gifts, this plate must always be over his forehead, so that they may find favor with the Lord.” (Ex 28:36-38). This is Aaron’s miter upon which is written “Sacred to Yahweh.” Lady Jerusalem, the city of the worship of the true God, becomes a priest, Aaron’s successor.²

Up, Jerusalem, stand on the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that they are remembered by God. Most of the Israelite Exiles have been carried off to Babylon, 900 miles due east of Jerusalem. Many others have been scattered throughout the Near East, many due west in Egypt. The people were carried off in several waves that began as early as 597. From all directions God seeks to draw all His children to Himself.

Note that it is God who is commanding that all the mountains be made low, and all the valleys be filled in. God wants to prepare the way for his children to return. In the Gospel this weekend, John the Baptist will quote Isaiah, and the focus will be on preparing a way for God to us.

1. Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy; *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*; P.C.; N.J.; page 564.

2. *Ibid.* page 567.

Exegesis (Continued)

Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.

Psalm 126 consists of 6 verses, all of which are included for our liturgy. The song is titled *The Reversal of Zion's Fortunes – A Song of Ascents*. The song looks forward to a time of rejoicing when the people will be set free from bondage. *Those who sow in tears will reap rejoicing*. The current state is that of tears of sorrow, tears that will one day turn into tears of joy. It is a dream of better days. They are anticipating the power of God acting on their behalf.

Some exegetes suggest that this psalm may have been written shortly after the Israelites were set free from the Exile in Babylon. Certainly, this seems plausible. The powerful hand of God could be seen in the actions of King Cyrus after the Persians overthrew Babylon. Whether this psalm describes a current event or is a prophesy it joyfully describes the powerful saving hand of God at work. It may even be looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. The combination of seeds for sowing and the forces of nature would suggest a human partnership with God in this process of salvation.

The Negeb is a desert in Southern Judah, that is dry in the summer, but stream beds flow with water in the fall of the year. As they carry their seeds for sowing, they anticipate the time when they will have to rebuild their temple, their city and their lives. The Good News is that the saving power of God is with them on this journey.

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

Philippi was a flourishing town in the Roman province of Macedonia. It is situated on a busy road, the Via Egnatia, linking the Adriatic and Aegean Seas. The city lacked a Jewish synagogue. There was a very small Jewish community there so Paul's community was predominantly Gentile. The community was established by Paul during his second missionary journey. It was the first community established in Europe. (See Acts 19:9-40).

After the standard greeting Paul begins: "I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, (our pericope begins) praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you..." (Ph 1:4). Paul quite often begins with gratitude to God for the faith that he saw in the early church communities. Our passage is titled *Thanksgiving and Prayer*.

The expression of joy flows throughout the *Letter to the Philippians*, e.g., (1:18, 25; 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29; 3:1; 4: 1, 4, 10).

Because of your partnership in the Gospel. The underlying Greek word that is translated as *partnership* is *koinonia*. The word means partnership, participation, fellowship, sharing, communion or association. It has evolved to describe a close Christian community bonded by love in Christ. This community of love filled with the Holy Spirit was Paul's source of gratitude and joy.

Paul's prayer is that the community may increase in love, and knowledge of every kind (faith) to discern what is of value, to be blameless for the day of Christ, i.e. the Parousia, for the glory and praise of God.

Exegesis (Continued)

Luke 3:1-6

St. Luke introduces John the Baptist and places him in a very specific historically accurate timeframe. The word of the Lord came to him at a very specific time and in a very specific place in human history. The Roman historian Josephus, reports that Tiberius Caesar began his reign in the year 14 A.D.,³ so the 15th year would place John the Baptist beginning his public ministry in the year 29. I think the point is not so much the historicity as the fact that the Word of God did not come to the political or the religious rulers but came to an itinerant peasant preacher. This continues the story of God humbling Himself, being born of a peasant girl in a manger. Jesus would one day Himself enter the waters of the Jordan river in solidarity with our sinful human condition, and one day humble Himself to pick up His Cross.

John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The word that we translate as *proclaiming* is *kerysso* in the original Greek. This is a word that is used consistently throughout the NT to proclaim the Good News. It is a word that Jesus uses in verse 4:18; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim (*kerysso*) liberty to captives...” (See also Lk 8:1, 39; 9:2; 12:3; 24:47; Acts 8:5; 9:20; 10:37; 19:13; 20:25; and 28:31).

The Greek word for *repentance* is the familiar word *metanoia*, which means to change direction, a change of mind or heart. It is comprised of two Greek words *meta* and *noia*. *Noia* is the word for mind or intellect. *Meta* means to change. *Meta* was used to describe a turn around marker in a race. It has also evolved to mean *beyond*, e.g., *metaphysical* describes that which is beyond the physical. *Metanoia* can describe a place beyond the mind, i.e., going to a deeper level, to go within the human heart. God’s love and mercy are beyond intellectual comprehension and must be experienced at a deeper level. Both Matthew and Mark quote Jesus proclaiming *metanoia* as He began His public ministry. “Repent (*metanoia*), for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mt 4:17). At its deepest level *metanoia* means to reconnect with the God, the source of love and mercy. (see the prayer of Jonah in the belly of the whale).

Speaking of the birth of John and his future ministry “Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied, saying: ...to give His people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.” (Lk 1:77). The goal of turning back to God and reconnecting with the source of love and mercy is the forgiveness of our sins.

John the Baptist then quotes from Isaiah. His quote is taken from the beginning of *Deutero-Isaiah*. It is sometimes referred to as *The Book of Consolation*. It begins: “Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her service (servitude and exile) is at an end, her guilt is expiated; Indeed, she has received from the hand of the Lord double for all her sins. (Our pericope begins here) A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; The rugged land shall be made plain, the rough country, a broad valley.” (Is 40:1-4).

Deutero-Isaiah was composed during the Exile. Most of the Israelites are in Babylon, 900 miles due East of Jerusalem. Between them and Jerusalem lies some rugged country. The imagery is that of preparing a road between the people and their God. *Prepare the way of the Lord*. The Greek word for *way* is *hodos*. It originally meant road or path but has evolved in Sacred Scripture to mean more of a way of living, as in living in right relationship with God. The early Christians were known as the people of the Way, because of their way of life as followers of Jesus. Jesus Himself proclaimed, “I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life.” (Jn 14:6)

3. Josephus; Jewish War 2:169-174.

Reflection

Our Scripture readings this weekend for the Second Sunday of Advent are appropriately about preparing the way for God in our lives. Our first reading is taken from the Prophet Baruch. The Prophet is writing at a time when the Israelite people are exiled in Babylon. The prophesy is that God will clear the path for the people to return to the Holy City, Jerusalem. God will make the mountains low and fill in the valleys “that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God... for God is leading Israel in joy by the light of his glory.” God wants an open and clear path to His love. He wants a clear path for us to return to Him.

Our Psalm is full of rejoicing as the people are on their way back to the Holy City. They recognize the hand of God in their newfound freedom as they sing, “The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.” The hand of God was obvious to all in the manner in which they were set free. Not only were they set free but the powers that were enslaving them were crushed and the new king of the conquering Persians even agreed to finance the rebuilding of the great temple, the center of their lives. It was God who was once again intervening in human history and was leading His people to Himself.

Our Gospel uses the same language as that of Baruch and the Prophet Isaiah as John the Baptist talks about making the mountains low and filling in the valleys to prepare the way of the Lord. Only this time the image is coming from a completely different direction. Whereas, in our first reading God is preparing the way for us, in the Gospel John the Baptist is challenging us to prepare the way for God. The question is, “Why does God need us to prepare the way for Him?”

The imagery of our scripture involves obstacles that separate us from God. Separation from God in religious language is called sin. The Church Fathers saw the mountains as sin in our lives, obstacles that we must overcome. Likewise, they saw the valleys as sins of omission. Virtues and love must be added to our lives to fill in those valleys in order to make the path to God level and smooth. John the Baptist is calling for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is about the washing away of sins and thus opening ourselves to God. Jesus Himself entered the waters of baptism in solidarity with us. As He came out of the water the heavens were opened, the voice of God was heard, and the Spirit of God was seen descending like a dove upon Jesus. Filled with Holy Spirit, Jesus was led by the Spirit throughout His life. We as the body of Christ are called to be Spirit filled, Spirit led, and Spirit giving people.

The readings this weekend portray two converging desires. God so loved the world that He is sending His only Son into our world. We are preparing to meet Him who is both the deepest longing of our hearts and the fulfillment of that longing. Prepare the way to receive Jesus ever new this Advent Season. Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of us your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love. Amen.

Yours in Christ,



Personal Witness

Bob and Sally (not their real names) were daily Mass attendees at one of my parish assignments years ago. Together they led the rosary before daily Mass. They were a loving couple that had recently celebrated 65 years of marriage. They had been retired for years and were the proud parents of 11 children and many grandchildren and great grandchildren. Bob was a retired bank executive and Sally a retired nurse. They had a beautiful home on an inland lake that was a regular vacation spot for extended family.

Sally was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, and it advanced very rapidly. Bob lovingly cared for her at home during her final months. Most of the time he had the help of children and grandchildren. On the evening of the day that she passed I was with Bob and his family at their home. They were sharing memories and gathering pictures and preparing for her funeral celebration. Bob invited me into his den, and I immediately began to peruse his bookshelves filled with spiritual classics. He brought me an old-time ledger book. Being an old-time accountant who started with ledger books I found it fascinating. He opened it and began to show me the contents. He had recorded all the Masses, all the rosaries, and all the novenas that he and Sally had prayed during their retirement years. Then he asked me, "Do you think it is enough?" I am not sure that I hid my look of surprise very well as I responded, "What do you mean, Bob?" He asked, "Is it enough to get Sally into heaven?" My response was, "Bob, I don't think God works that way."

Tears started to well up in his eyes. I said, "Bob, God loves you and God loves Sally." As we stood there, I repeated several times, "Bob, God loves you." This tall, heavysset, elderly man fell into my arms sobbing. As I held him tight for a few moments I gently sat him in his favorite chair. As he was drying his eyes with his handkerchief he said, "No one ever told me that God loved me before." I said, "Bob, I have told you a million times that God loves you!" For years God's love has been a predominant theme in my homilies and Bob had attended every one of them and had listened attentively with his ears. Yet, this was the first time that Bob had really heard those words with his heart.

Bob was a highly decorated WWII veteran. Something happened during the war that Bob was never able to forgive himself for. With his deep feelings of unworthiness, he was feeling unlovable. For years he had been blocking God out of his life. At a moment of deep mourning and loss, he was finally able to fall to his knees before God and feel the embrace of His unconditional love. He shared with me that for the first time in decades he was able to experience real joy. Bob was able to live out the rest of his life with joy, with the fruits the Holy Spirit flowing in and through him. For the first time in years he was fully alive!

If there are any obstacles between yourself and God, now is the time to remove them. Ask for help. Please don't wait. Life is short. The gift is there but it must be opened. Love has to be experienced. God is good and God loves you!

F. Glenn