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)

Second Sunday of Advent—Year A

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"In all things give thanks, it is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"

(1 Thess: 5:18)

Second Sunday of Advent—Year A

Reading 1

Isaiah 11:1-10

On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,
and from his roots a bud shall blossom.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him:
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
a spirit of counsel and of strength,
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD,
and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD.
Not by appearance shall he judge,
nor by hearsay shall he decide,
but he shall judge the poor with justice,
and decide aright for the land's afflicted.
He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
Justice shall be the band around his waist,
and faithfulness a belt upon his hips.
Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall browse together,
with a little child to guide them.
The cow and the bear shall be neighbors,
together their young shall rest;
the lion shall eat hay like the ox.
The baby shall play by the cobra's den,
and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.
There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD,
as water covers the sea.
On that day, the root of Jesse,
set up as a signal for the nations,
the Gentiles shall seek out,
for his dwelling shall be glorious.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

R. (cf. 7) **Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.**
O God, with your judgment endow the king,
and with your justice, the king's son;
he shall govern your people with justice
and your afflicted ones with judgment.
R. **Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.**

Justice shall flower in his days,
and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
R. **Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.**

For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out,
and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor;
the lives of the poor he shall save.
R. **Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.**

May his name be blessed forever;
as long as the sun his name shall remain.
In him shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed;
all the nations shall proclaim his happiness.
R. **Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever.**

Reading 2

Romans 15:4-9

Brothers and sisters:
Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction,
that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures
we might have hope.
May the God of endurance and encouragement
grant you to think in harmony with one another,
in keeping with Christ Jesus,
that with one accord you may with one voice
glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you,
for the glory of God.
For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised
to show God's truthfulness,
to confirm the promises to the patriarchs,
but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.
As it is written:
Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles
and sing praises to your name.

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

Matthew 3: 1-12

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea
and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"
It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:
A voice of one crying out in the desert,
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.
John wore clothing made of camel's hair
and had a leather belt around his waist.
His food was locusts and wild honey.
At that time Jerusalem, all Judea,
and the whole region around the Jordan
were going out to him
and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River
as they acknowledged their sins.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees
coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers!
Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?
Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.
And do not presume to say to yourselves,
'We have Abraham as our father.'
For I tell you,
God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.
Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees.
Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit
will be cut down and thrown into the fire.
I am baptizing you with water, for repentance,
but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I.
I am not worthy to carry his sandals.
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
His winnowing fan is in his hand.
He will clear his threshing floor
and gather his wheat into his barn,
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Exegesis

Isaiah 11:1-10

The Prophet Isaiah begins his book as follows: "The vision which Isaiah, son of Amos, had concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah." Through extra biblical sources experts can ascertain the dates that the kings reigned, Jotham (742-735, Ahaz (735-715) and Hezekiah (715-354). In our pericope today Isaiah reveals the year that he experienced his call to ministry as the year that King Uzziah died, which was 742 B.C. Experts also suggest that Isaiah remained in his role as a prophet until 701 when Jerusalem was under the siege of the Assyrians.

The dates are Important in that it gives a backdrop for the political and religious environment in which Isaiah lived and exercised his role as a prophet for Yahweh. It was a time of great civil unrest. The Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians in the year 722.

When Isaiah was called, there was widespread infidelity to Yahweh. The prophet says it quite succinctly: "Ah! Sinful nation, people laden with wickedness, evil race, corrupt children! They have forsaken the Lord, spurned the Holy One of Israel, apostatized." (Is 1: 4). Despite their infidelity, the prophet always holds fast to the faithfulness of Yahweh, to His infinite love and mercy. "Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they be crimson red they may become white as wool." (Is 1: 18). As Isaiah links his mission, his calling, to Yahweh, Himself, it gives him the authority that he needs to deliver a message that might be difficult for many to hear. It not only gave Isaiah credibility, but it would give him courage and perseverance in a long a difficult battle against compromised religious practices. Isaiah, himself, has a feeling of unworthiness as he stands before Yahweh. Nevertheless, his purification occurs swiftly when the seraphim press a glowing ember from the altar against his mouth.

The theophany that Isaiah experienced as Yahweh called him to ministry certainly gave him the courage to persevere during this challenging time for Israel and Judah. His powerful prophecies helped to ignite the great religious reforms under the reign of King Hezekiah in 715. Many years passed, however, between Isaiah's calling in 742 and the beginning of Hezekiah's reforms.

Our pericope today is titled in the NAB *The Rule of Emmanuel* and in the ESV *The Righteous Reign of the Branch.* I would note that it is not just an ordinary branch on the tree, however, it is a branch that sprouts from the stump itself.

On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The image of a shoot from the stump of Jesse describes a return to the original choice of Yahweh to choose David, the lowly shepherd boy, to be king. This depicts a return to that primordial choice of God. Luke articulates this in *Acts.* "Then they asked for a king. God gave them Saul, son of Kish, a man from the tribe of Benjamim, for forty years. Then He removed him and raised up David as their king; of him He testified, 'I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after My own heart; he will carry out My every wish.' From this man's descendants God, according to His promise, has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus." (Acts 13: 21-23).

The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD, and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD. The Hebrew word that is translated throughout this verse as *Spirit* is *Ruah. Ruah* can be translated as *breath, breeze, wind,* or *spirit.* In the creation story it was the *mighty wind* (*Ruah*) that hovered over the waters. The Hebrew word that is translated in this verse and throughout this passage as *LORD* is *Yahweh.* From Moses forward the Spirit of Yahweh was portrayed as a Divine force that was bestowed upon individuals to guide and empower them to fulfill the mission of Yahweh accompanied by superhuman traits. (See Num 11:17; Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; Mic 3:8, 1 Sam 16:13). 1 Samuel specifically speaks of the Spirit given to David. "Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in his hand, anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and from that day on, the Spirit (*Ruah*) of the Lord (*Yahweh*) rushed upon David." (1 Sam 16: 13). That same Spirit descended upon Jesus. "After Jesus was baptized, He came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened and He saw the Spirit of God descending

Exegesis

Isaiah 11:1-10

like a dove and coming upon Him." (Mt 3: 16). (See also Is 61:1; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22). Throughout this verse the Hebrew word that is translated as *Spirit* is *Ruah.* In that this word continues to refer to the Spirit of God, the ESV has *Spirit* capitalized throughout this passage.

Our pericope also contains the foundational passage in Sacred Scripture revealing the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts flow from the indwelling of the Spirit of God in the human soul. The Hebrew word that is translated in this passage as *fear* is *yirah. Yirah* can describe a craven fear, however, in our relationship with Yahweh, it most often connotes a sense of *awe* and *reverence,* as in creature standing before creator. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit enlighten this basic understanding and knowledge of our total dependence on God. *Proverbs* articulates it this way: "The fear (*yirah*) of the Lord (*Yahweh*) is the beginning of knowledge; wisdom and instruction fools despise." (Prov 1: 7).

Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide, but he shall judge the poor with justice and decide aright for the land's afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God, the Messiah will rule with justice and faithfulness. The psalmist also sings of this promised Messiah. "That He may govern your people with justice, your oppressed with right judgment… That He may defend the oppressed among the people, save the poor and crush the oppressor." (Ps 72: 2, 4). "With an iron rod You shall shepherd them, like a clay pot You will shatter them." (Ps 2: 9).

In the verses that follow, Isaiah foresees Paradise as in a time before the Fall. Trito-Isaiah repeats the prophesy. "The wolf and the lamb shall gaze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain." (Is 65: 25). When Jesus turned to the repentant thief from the Cross, He said, "*"Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* The Greek word that is translated as *Paradise* in this verse is *Paradeisos. Paradeisos* is derived from a Persian word that means *garden,* or *orchard,* or *park,* i.e., *place of pleasure.* The word is used three times in the NT. It makes its first appearance, however, in the Greek OT in Genesis 2: 8 to describe the Garden of Eden before the Fall. "Then the Lord God planted a garden (*paradeisos*) in Eden, in the east, and He placed there the man whom He had formed." (Gen 2: 8). In the NT the word appears in *2 Corinthians* and *Revelation.* "And I know that this person was caught up into Paradise (*Paradeisos*) and heard ineffable things, which no one may utter." (2 Cor 12: 4). "Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the victor I will give the right to eat from the tree of life that is in the garden of God (*Paradeisos*)." (Rev 2: 7).

There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD, as water covers the sea. "Woe to him who builds a city by bloodshed and establishes a town by wickedness! Is this not from the Lord of hosts: peoples toil for what the flames consume, and nations grow weary for nought! But the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord's glory as water covers the sea." (Hab 2: 12-14).

On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious. The Hebrew word that is translated as *signal* in this verse it *nes. Nes* can be also translated as *sign.* The miracles of John's Gospel are referred to as *signs.* Ultimately the Cross is the *sign* of God's love for the nations.

Exegesis (Continued)

Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17

Psalm 72 and Psalm 127 are titled *Of Solomon.* Only these two psalms make that claim. Psalm 72 is titled *A Prayer for the King – Of Solomon.* It consists of 20 verses. Verse 20 is as follows: "The end of the psalms of David, son of Jesse." *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* dates this psalm as early as the 10th Century B.C.[1]

The Psalm proclaims the never-ending Kingdom under the lineage of King David, e.g., "May he live as long as the sun endures." (Ps 72:5). "May his name be blessed forever; as long as the sun, may his name endure." (Ps 72:17a).

The Psalm supports the theme of the universal call of all people to God. "May the tribes of the earth give blessing to his name; may all the nations regard him as favored." (Ps 72:17b). This universal call to all peoples reinforces the promises found in Gen. 12:3, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14, 48:20, Sir 44:21, Is 49:6 and Zech 2:11.

Psalm 72 speaks of our right relationship with God, that in the presence of God's Glory we are called to bow down in adoration. "May the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Seba offer gifts." (Ps 72:10).

O God, with your judgment endow the king, and with your justice, the king's son; he shall govern your people with justice and your afflicted ones with judgment. The Prophet Isaiah confirms this promise of God. "For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon His shoulder dominion rests. They name Him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which He confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever." (Is 9: 5-6).

Justice shall flower in his days, and profound peace, till the moon be no more. May he rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. The Hebrew word that is translated in this verse as *justice* is *saddiq* which is also translated as *righteous* or *devout.* The Hebrew word that is translated as *peace* is *shalom.* In Jewish thought, *Shalom* has its origin in God. The vast territory described in this verse confirms the universality of God's call. The River is the Euphrates. "And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates." (Ex 23: 31). The Psalmist extends this *to the ends of the earth.*

For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out, and the afflicted when he has no one to help him. He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor; the lives of the poor he shall save. "For I rescued the poor who cried out for help, the orphans, and the unassisted." (Job 29: 12).

May his name be blessed forever; as long as the sun his name shall remain. In him shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed; all the nations shall proclaim his happiness. The ESV translates the first part of this verse as follows: "May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun!" The Hebrew word that is translated as *blessed* and *endure* in this passage is *ehyeh.* It is the same word that is translated in Exodus 3:14 as I AM. God is revealing Himself to Moses as the one whose nature is *to be,* i.e., *being itself.* The Hebrew word that is translated as *blessed* in this verse is *asre. Asre* is the closest equivalent to the Greek word *makarios.* Similar to *makarios, asre* means *fortunate* or *happy* and is most often translated as *blessed,* which describes a state of being.

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1. Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy; New Jerome Biblical Commentary; P.H.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; page 538.

Exegesis (Continued)

Romans 15:4-9

Scholars agree that Paul wrote his *Letter to the Romans* in late 57 A.D. It is believed that he wrote it from Corinth near the end of his third missionary journey. There was an established Jewish community in Rome, with at least twelve active synagogues. There also was the presence of a Christian community, obviously, as Paul is directing his letter to them. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote of an edict declared by the Emperor Claudius in the year 49 that ordered the expulsion of Jews from Rome who were proclaiming Christ as the Messiah. The historical origin of the Church in Rome remains a mystery, however.

As Chapter 15 of *Romans* begins Paul is encouraging the congregation to follow Christ more closely in His self-denial, His self-giving love, and the gift of Himself to Jew and Gentile alike. Chapter 15 begins: "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves; let each of us please our neighbor for the good, for building up. For Christ did not please Himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you fall upon Me.'" (Rom 15: 1-3). Paul is encouraging those who are *strong.* The Greek word that is translated as *strong* here is *dynatos. Dynatos* means *strong, mighty,* and *powerful.* It also means *able* or *competent.* Paul is calling upon those who are the most mature in their faith to be patient with those who are less advanced in the faith, e.g., some Gentiles, and to set a good example for them.

Brothers and sisters: Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Paul is teaching those new to the faith and reminding those who are strong in faith that Scripture is their foundation. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Tim 3: 16). Jesus Christ and the Word of God is our source of hope. "This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life." (Ps 119: 50).

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this verse, Paul turns his exhortation into a prayer and a blessing. By calling upon God as the God of endurance and encouragement, Paul is proclaiming that God Himself is the source of our endurance and encouragement, e.g., putting on the heart and the mind of Christ. The literal translation of the phrase *with one accord* is *to think the same among one another.* Only putting on the heart and mind of Christ could so unite a community of faith. This is the community comprised of both Jews and Gentiles that Paul envisions as the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

The Greek word that is translated as *glorify* in this verse is *doxazo. Doxazo* means to *exalt, to give glory and honor and praise.* A united community in Christ by its very nature gives glory to God. *God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* is a common title for God the Father in scripture. (See 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3; Jn 20:17; Rev 1:6).

Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. The Geek word that is translated as *truthfulness* is *aletheia. Aletheia* describes something much deeper than the English word *truth* connotes. It means *ultimate reality.* Jesus revealed Himself to be the Truth (*Aletheia*). The Truth is revealed in the totality of Sacred Scripture, the Eternal Word. Jesus is the Word made flesh. The OT is fulfilled in Him, the long-awaited Messiah, the Truth, the Light of the World, the Light to the Nations.

As it is written: "*Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name."* Here, Paul is citing one or both of the following OT passages. "Therefore, will I proclaim you, O Lord, among the nations, and I will sing praise to Your name." (2 Sam 22: 50). "Thus, I will proclaim You, Lord, among the nations; I will sing the praises of Your name." (Ps 18: 50).

Exegesis (Continued

Matthew 3: 1-12

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Matthew transitions abruptly from the infancy narratives to the appearance of John the Baptist. He simply begins with a common OT expression, i.e., *In those days.* Luke is more specific. 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, i.e., the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. 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 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 furthers the reality 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.

The Greek word that is translated as *preaching* is *kerysso. Kerysso* can also be translated as *proclaim, herald* or *announcing. Kerysso* is used consistently throughout the NT to proclaim (kerysso) the Good News. Jesus begins His public ministry with the same proclamation as John. "From that time on Jesus began to preach (*kerysso*) and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" (Mt 4: 17). The Greek word for *repentance* is the familiar word *metanoia,* which means to change direction, or a change of mind or heart. It is comprised of two Greek words *meta* and *noia. Noia* in the word for mind or intellect. *Meta* means to *change*. *Meta* was the name given for a turnaround 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 within the human heart. God's love and mercy is 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. 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).

The expression *Kingdom of Heaven* is common in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew quotes Jesus as informing His disciples to make this proclamation as well. "And proclaim as you go, saying, the *Kingdom of Heaven* is at hand." (Mt 10: 7). The Prophet Daniel spoke of this kingdom. "In the lifetime of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed or delivered up to other people; rather, it will break in pieces all these kingdoms and put an end to them, and it shall stand forever." (Dan 2: 44).

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)

Exegesis (Continued

Matthew 3: 1-12

John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. The clothing and the diet were not uncommon for the desert area near Palestine. Some suggest that it is a link to Elijah. "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite." (2 Kgs 1: 8). "Of them you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind." (Lev 11: 22). "And when the people entered the forest, behold, the honey was dropping." (1 Sam 14: 26).

At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.
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.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? " Like, Jesus, John the Baptist saw the malice in the hearts of these religious groups. Matthew would later quote Jesus: "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Mt 12: 34).

I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Ritual cleansing was an integral part of Jewish religious ritual. "When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the blood-stains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning." (Is 4: 4). The image of the purification by fire was also in their religious rituals. "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD." (Mal 3: 2-3).

Reflection

The Season of Advent is about preparing for the coming of Jesus into our lives. It is about waiting and watching. There is nothing passive about this wait, however. The Word of God is calling us to action. The readings for this past weekend challenged us to be working and watching. God is calling us to prepare the way for His Holy Spirit to enter more deeply into our hearts and souls, into our consciousness.

The Word is calling us not so much to be watching and waiting for some future event. The Word is asking us to be aware and conscience of God's presence in the here and now of our lives. St. John of the Cross talked about profound mystical experiences of union with God. It is a union of love that he described with beautiful poetic language. He taught that this profound experience of God is available to every human being at every second of our lives. Unfortunately, we are not open to this experience. We are too preoccupied with the mundane and the busyness of day-to-day life. If we were more watchful and alert to God's presence, we would not miss God in the profound beauty of life's abundant blessings.

St. Augustine said, "God is closer to us than we are to ourselves." God is the source and ground of our being. The road that we need to make clear is the road between the surface of life and the depth of our souls. This is the highway in the desert that the Prophet Isaiah talks about in our first reading this weekend. It is the highway between our mind and the depth of our hearts. Because God respects our freewill, we are free to open this highway to God or to keep the way closed. The entire season of Advent is challenging us to keep the road clear for God. In Yooper (Northern Michigander) language… to keep the road plowed and salted, open for travel.

Today's Gospel is the story of John the Baptist. Historians tell us that thousands and thousands of people were flocking to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. People then, as now and always, were looking for something more. They were aware of their alienation from God. It is part of being human. It is part of our fallen nature. They were aware of their need to wash away the old and rise to newness of life. They were aware of their need for a Savior. They longed for the expected Messiah.

This Advent Season ask yourself the question, "Who is waiting for whom?" Are we waiting for God or is God waiting for us. Scripture reveals a God who waits and yearns for us. Jesus tells us the beautiful parable that we call the *Prodigal Son*. The parable is about a God who allows us the freedom to stray from His love, a God who waits and longs for His prodigal son to return. Every time we get up and turn back toward God, God is already there waiting for us.

We pray, "Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!" Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." The door handle is on the inside. Open the door! Come Holy Spirit fill the heart of us Your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love. Amen.

In Christ's Love,

Fr Glenn

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. 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, heavyset, elderly man fell into my arms sobbing. As I held him 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 and 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. God is good and God loves you!

Fr Glenn