

Second Sunday of Advent – Dec. 9-10, 2017

We ended the Church liturgical year with the scripture readings calling us to be awake and prepare for the Lord's coming.

Last Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, we began the new Church year also with calls in the reading to be ready and watching for the Lord's coming. As I said at the end of the homily last week -- the Lord, as much as he wants us to be prepared for his final coming -- he also does not want us to miss the graces and new life that he is offering to us daily in this life.

Well, as I reflected on the readings for this Second Sunday of Advent, it seems that they bear the need and deserve yet another focus on the call to "prepare the way of the Lord."

In the first reading, "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God." ---are God's words through the prophet Isaiah addressed to God's people – the Israelites – who for 50 years have been refugees and slaves in Babylon. Isaiah is announcing that God is ready to set them free and bring them back home. The route by which the Lord will lead them home is "the way of the Lord".

Attention must be given to preparing this way or route because it will take them through mountains and desert. So, the images in that first reading of God making the mountains low, filling in the valleys and making the rough ways smooth are quite beautiful. God will be leading them like a shepherd and bringing them home.

God is preparing the way for them, but the key idea is the that they will be prepare the way in their hearts and lives for God to come to them, and that they will be prepared for what God is doing for them. "Make straight a highway in the wasteland for God", the Lord says to them. He tells them to "go up on the high mountain and

cry out to all that God is coming with to power to save them and strengthen them.”

Today we heard the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Mark begins his gospel with great directness and simplicity -- “This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Let us not miss the importance of these quick words in the first sentence of his gospel.

What could be more basic to our faith than our belief that Jesus is not only our savior and Messiah, but that he is Son of God and that everything about him is good news for us. Many other religions – Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, etc. have their holy men and prophets – but none are honored as God. Jesus is proclaimed in the gospels as God (not ”a” God, but “the” God, the only God, one in being with the Father and the Holy Spirit). So, Mark gets right to the essence of our faith as he begins his gospel.

After this, St. Mark doesn’t spend any time telling us about Jesus’ birth or about his parents. (We can thank St. Matthew and St. Luke for those stories.) Rather, in order to stress another concept that is essential for us if we are going to experience the gospel as the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God, Mark next begins his gospel by telling us about John the Baptist.

It was important for St. Mark to talk about John the Baptist as he began his gospel for two reasons. First, many people thought that John the Baptist was the Messiah. John is no lightweight person – he is a powerful preacher. Mark makes it clear in John’s own words that he is not the Messiah – “One mightier than I is coming after me.” The second reason it is important to bring up John the Baptist as he begins his gospel is the message of John the Baptist which is to prepare.

In today’s Gospel, we hear John the Baptist, 500 years after Isaiah’s words in the first reading were spoken, taking up the same theme and

words to call the people of his day to prepare the way for Jesus.

John the Baptist is not talking about preparing our house, or our gifts, or our meals, or our Christmas celebrations, which we always do at this time of the year, which are wonderful traditions. He is talking about preparing our hearts. ---- Can we open our hearts to Jesus or to others any more than we already have? Can we say we love God perfectly and completely, or our neighbor perfectly and completely?

In preparing the way of the Lord, there may not be any mountains or hills of pride that have to come down. There may not be valleys of spiritual laziness that need to be filled in or rough country of serious sin that need to be eliminated from our life to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. But if we think hard, we might discover little areas here and there where we could love God or others more. We need to clear the way for Christ to come to us.

“Prepare the way of the Lord” was the message of the Baptist and the message of the gospels. Yes, we have been blessed through Baptism and all the other sacraments with every spiritual blessing in the heavens as St. Paul said in the reading we heard on the holy day on Friday, but are there not obstacles along the “way of the Lord” in our life to bring these gifts fully home and into our life and to their fullest realization in our life? Christ has baptized us in the Holy Spirit, but are we living in the Spirit and guided by the Holy Spirit in all we do?

In the bulletin today there is an examination of conscience to help us reflect on these things, and then, to bring them to healing, we have the communal sacrament of reconciliation available to us this Sunday afternoon at 3:30 PM at Sacred Heart or on Wed. at Blessed Sacrament Ch. in Greenbush.

We do not enter into God's kingdom by accident or by default. Its like everything else in life, if we want something worthwhile or to accomplish something worth accomplishing, we need to prepare – we need effort and desire.

Many people assume God's kingdom will be somehow different than everything else in life, that it will take little or no effort on our part to be part of it --- that somehow it will come to everyone automatically.

The gospels do not tell us that. With St. Mark and John the Baptist they tell us quite simply and directly: “Prepare!” We need to prepare.

That is what the gospel and readings have to say about preparing the way of the Lord in our spiritual life in this Advent season.

As a help to prepare you to join me in thanking God for graces and helps that He has given me over 40 years of ministry as a priest that we are also celebrating in this Mass, I will share a few things about my call and ministry.

I will say first that I was not too excited to celebrate my 40th anniversary. It is not that I do not like celebrations or anniversaries. I planned and completely enjoyed my 25th anniversary of priesthood. However, I was thinking that my next celebration would be on my 50th anniversary God-willing.

However, in thinking about where I might be in ten years, it is pretty reasonable to think that I will not still be pastor here in these parishes or elsewhere. So it makes good sense to celebrate while I am still with you and in parish life.

Besides that, as we get older, we realize more and more that everything is the grace of God, and because of that we can never thank God or celebrate God's blessings too much or too often

So, today we are celebrating God's grace to me and to others through 40 years of priesthood. – Someone asked how I felt about the 40 years over all – and whether they had gone fast or not?

I have to say right away that they have seemed to go very fast. From day one I have never had a boring day and every day I have wished that I had more time to do more things for the parish. It did not help to slow things down that I moved 11 times in my ministry and have served in 23 different parishes – some of them three times. This is why I have so many different friends. Moving and starting over again takes a lot of time and effort, but I got through them, and I have to give credit to the help of my parents and family in making those moves. My Dad really seemed to enjoy packing books into boxes. Maybe that came from being in the CCC program and in the military for three years. Both moved around a lot and being able to pack carefully and well made things easier.

But even though it has gone fast, and I haven't always done things as well as I should or wanted to, it has been a fulfilling life for me.

My first and strongest inspirations to priesthood came from mission magazines in our home that showed pictures of people so happy and smiling around their pastor or religious sisters and brothers serving them – that, and similar happy gatherings at our family parish. I wanted to help bring that joy and happiness that I saw in those pictures and times to others in my life.

So, as I see parishioners working together and enjoying each other and supporting each other almost every day, I feel fulfilled that even in a small way God has allowed me to have a part in these ongoing experiences of joy and community.

As far as hopes for the future, I am trusting that God who has brought me through several accidents and fairly serious health issues will

continue to protect me and my health enough to keep me going for a while yet.

I truly do not have a “bucket list”. I feel that I have had more than my share of opportunities to travel and have different experiences. I would be content to stay home in a monastery the rest of my life as long as it involved some farming (you can't take the farm out me.) If there is anything I desire for the future, it is to go deeper in my relationship with God and to share more fully with others the wonderful gifts that God has given me. -- From my youth onwards, I have always liked to reflect on things and learn new things, and have always felt that the things we don't see, or see directly, are more interesting than the things that we do see directly.

Other than that, right now I just want to thank God for all the people that I have been blessed to know and be friends with. (I really feel like I have too many friends and not enough time to speak with them and be with them.) -- I thank God for the bishops, (including Bishop Hoepfner) and brother priests and pastors of other churches that I have shared life and ministry with. I was the first priest ordained by Bishop Balke. I thank God for you and all the parishioners and people of the various communities that I have served. -- I am grateful for my good parents (now deceased) and brothers and sisters. Sometimes we have to work hard to get along -- especially when we give each other unasked for advice at times -- but we stick together and enjoy our family life.

I will end here by thanking Bishop Hoepfner and all of you for taking the time to come and share in this Mass and thanksgiving to God and the food and program after. ---- May this celebration strengthen our union with God and each other, and strengthen us to be prepared for whatever God has yet in mind for us in this life and in the life to come.