

Second Sunday of Advent

When the Lord comes near, he humbles his people

By the second Sunday in Advent, the month of December has begun and the pre-Christmas frenzy is in full swing. The people of God enter his house with calendars that are full and to-do lists that are a mile long. Therefore, as the message of Advent preparation intensifies for the next two weeks, they might be tempted to view that preparation as one more obligation to fulfill and one more source of stress in their lives.

It will come as a welcome relief, therefore, to hear God's call of Advent preparation: Repent! Repentance is work God does for us rather than work we do for him. In order to prepare his people for his arrival, God takes the initiative by sending out messengers to herald it ahead of time. Our response to that announcement is not to clean up our lives the way we hastily clean up our homes in advance of a visit from company. God is not one more person we need to impress this time of year in addition to our employers, our children, and our out-of-town guests.

Instead, repentance is the opposite of work. It is the frank and honest admission that the only thing our work can do is distance us from God. It is the bold and joyful trust that the work needed to bring us close God has all been done by him. Even the fruits of repentance, the righteous offerings and acceptable sacrifices God surely desires, are exactly what their name suggests. They are fruit, the natural results of the work God does in our hearts through his Word.

At this time of year especially, the call to repent is a much-needed escape from our endless efforts to be and to do all that is expected of us. Rather than one more demand to do just a little bit more, the call to repent is God's gracious invitation to set down our work in order to make way for his.

CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH YEAR

ADVENT 1	When the Lord comes near, he humbles himself.
ADVENT 2	When the Lord comes near, he humbles his people.
ADVENT 3	When the Lord comes near, he humbles his enemies.
ADVENT 4	When the Lord comes near, he lifts up the humbled.

FESTIVAL INFORMATION

GOSPEL	Luke 3:1-6
FIRST READING	Malachi 3:1-7b
SECOND READING	Philippians 1:3-11
PSALM	Psalm 66
GOSPEL ACC	Luke 3:4,6
COLOR	Blue or Purple

Prayer of the Day

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming give us strength in our conflicts and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

If our hearts are to be ready for the arrival of God's Son, God must be the one to stir them up in preparation. His Word alone shows us the path that brings God to us and us to him—the path of repentance. This prayer comes from the Gregorian Sacramentary of the 10th Century.

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

Luke introduces the ministry of John the Baptist with a catalog of rulers that provides context and contrast. The ministries of John and the Messiah whose way he prepared did not happen “once upon a time long, long ago in a land far, far way.” These were real people and real events that occurred in a real place at a real time. Luke’s introduction gives us context.

It also provide contrast. The kingdom John came to herald and Jesus came to establish could not have been more different from the kingdom many in Israel were hoping for. Luke’s introduction makes it clear that Israel’s nationalistic expectations had not been fulfilled. It also foreshadows that they would not be fulfilled by Jesus. At the end of Jesus’ public ministry the situation Luke details would be more or less the same. Tiberias would still be Caesar. The high priesthood would still be split between Annas and Caiaphas, and its God-given power would be employed against God’s own Son. Pilate would still be governor and would preside over Jesus’ crucifixion. The kingdom Jesus came to establish was very different from the ones ruled by these men.

But even though Israel's hopes and dreams as a nation had all been dashed, God had even bigger plans for his people. Far removed from Jerusalem, the hub of political and religious life, John appeared in the wilderness to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God and to prepare God's people for it. The arrival of Christ and his kingdom was prefigured by God's rescue of his people from exile in Babylon. Even though both our worst sins and best efforts do nothing but distance us from God, God sent his own Son to cross the great desert between us and him. Christ came to keep God's holy law at every point and to pay for every instance it has been violated. Christ came in the flesh and, as a result, all people have seen God's salvation.

How do we respond when we hear God's messenger proclaim this wonderful news? We eagerly and joyfully make the road Christ travels as smooth as possible. We acknowledge the crooked paths our sins have made. We level the mountains of good deeds we have piled up as monuments to ourselves. His desire to be near to us produces our desire to be near to him. That desire shows itself in humble, repentant faith.

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-7b

God's people had returned from exile in Babylon. Worship at the temple in Jerusalem had resumed. However, the worship life of both priests and people was half-hearted and rife with abuse (Malachi 1:6-2:9). Nevertheless, the stubborn, apathetic people of God still dared to weary the Lord with demands that he bring justice to those who do evil (Malachi 2:17,18). They still expected him to restore their kingdom.

In response, God promised that he would, in fact, come near. The God they were seeking would come to his temple. In Christ, he would draw near in human flesh. However, when he did, his standards of justice would be much different from what they expected. Half-hearted, superficial worship would not satisfy him. Sorcery, corruption, and oppression would be exposed. Like a refiner with his fire and a launderer with his soap, Christ would purify priests and people so they could once again bring him righteous, acceptable offerings.

That makes Malachi's question a haunting one: "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears" (verse 2)? Thankfully, the Lord's love is just as unchanging as his justice. Before he brings his final, consuming judgment, he pleads with his people to return to him. He sends messengers ahead of him to do the same thing. Through his Word and the messengers who proclaim it, the Lord graciously does his refining, purifying work in our hearts so we can endure the day of judgment.

First Reading: Philippians 1:3-11

Paul had every reason to rejoice when he thought of the Christians in Philippi. From the day of his arrival until the day of his writing of this letter, the Christians in Philippi had not only believed the gospel but had become partners with him in that gospel as they generously supported him in his work (see Philippians 4:10-20, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

However, Paul knew that these results were God's doing, not his. Paul knew God had begun this work. Paul was confident God would bring it to completion until the day of Jesus' return.

As a result, as Paul prayed for their love to abound and for their knowledge to increase, he wasn't subtly laying on a guilt trip or making a passive-aggressive plea for more financial support. Rather, he was asking them to see the beautiful, ongoing effects of the gospel in their lives just as he saw them. He wanted them to know that even as they were already holy and blameless in God's sight for Jesus' sake, the same gospel that declared it to be so would continue to produce more fruit in their lives—all to the glory and praise of God.

What a beautiful vision of the gospel at work in the heart and life of the Christian! It's no wonder that Paul rejoiced. It's no wonder he would soon tell these Christians to do the same (Philippians 4:4-7, next week's Second Reading).

Psalm 66

The Church sings Psalm 66 in services that include joyful praise of God for his amazing saving activity. Sometimes the psalm addresses God,

and sometimes it addresses the people praising God. Martin Luther said, "Psalm 66 is a Psalm of thanksgiving for common blessings that God often gives us. Daily he delivers his and protects his people from their enemies, as he did at the Red Sea. By enumerating these blessings, the Church of Christ summons all people to faith."

Gospel Acclamation: Luke 3:4,6

Hymn of the Day

On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry