

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B

O God, comfort me that I might know Your consolation and have a supply to share with others! Remove whatever hinders the coming of Christ into my heart.

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

This is such powerful poetry that Handel's "Messiah" and at least a half a dozen other popular hymns have been inspired by this passage. This poem celebrates the return of the Israelites from Babylonian exile some 500 years before Christ. It ALSO prefigures the coming of Christ with John the Baptist as the "voice crying in the wilderness."

1Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. This is GOD speaking! HE WANTS HIS PEOPLE TO BE COMFORTED! It reminds us of 2 Corinthians 1:4-5 where "the God of all consolation comforts us in all our afflictions and thus enables us to comfort those who are in trouble, with the same consolation we have received from him."

2Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated; indeed, she has received from the hand of the Lord double for all her sins. "Service" means the servitude and exile of the Jewish people is at an end. The exile was seen as a punishment for sin. "Her guilt is expiated" means that she has suffered enough, she has served her sentence and it is time for a new beginning, a fresh start and the Lord who gave her DOUBLE punishment will now give her DOUBLE consolation.

3A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! ISAIAH himself is the voice crying in the wilderness.

4Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley.

5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. The figurative language here describes the actual return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. It is the Lord who leads them; their road is made easy for them. Some have also seen a second meaning in this leveling of the land where it refers to the human heart. When he says that the "mouth of the Lord has spoken," he means that GOD HAS ACTED because "word" and "deed" are the same word in Hebrew!

9Go up on to a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here the location shifts to Jerusalem where the people who have received prophecy are called to BECOME PROPHETS. Now that they have been roused, they are called to become rousers.

10Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him.

11Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care. Once again we have the image of God as a shepherd and here he feeds and gathers and carries and leads his people.

2Peter 3:8-14

Scoffers were asking: "Just when is Jesus coming? He is certainly taking his time." This letter, which addresses that question, is written to a number of communities in Asia Minor by St. Peter, the apostle and first Pope, around 64 A.D. to console and exhort them.

⁸Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. Peter uses v.4 of Psalm 90 as an authority for the view that time is a function of Creation. Just because the Parousia has not happened is no reason to deny that it will happen.

⁹The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,” but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. CCC 1037 tells us that God predestines NO one to go to hell which requires a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) and persistence in that mortal sin until the end.

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out. This is an adaptation of the Jewish notion of the Day of the Lord to the new Christian doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ. This applies equally well to the day of our death: the day on which God breaks into our lives! The “elements” are something other than the heavens and the earth, probably the heavenly bodies, and would seem to say that the universe will be destroyed.

¹¹Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion,

¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire.

¹³But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Here Peter tells us that we can actually HASTEN the coming of this glorious, long-awaited event, by leading holy lives. The image of fiery destruction is unsettling but comfort comes with the explanation that everything must melt in a blaze so that a new heaven and earth can replace the old! After the final judgment, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe, which is so closely related to man and which attains its destiny through him, will be perfectly re-established in Christ (CCC1042). This mysterious renewal, which will transform humanity and the world, is called “new heavens and a new earth.” Paul tells us in Romans 8:19-23 “that creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God...in hope because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay.” The visible universe will be transformed so that the world itself, RESTORED TO ITS ORIGINAL STATE, will be at the service of the just. There is no clearer sign of our hope in the new heavens and new earth than the EUCHARIST which gives us the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death and the food that makes us live forever in Jesus Christ (CCC1405).

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace. Peter’s logic is this: Since the world as we know it IS going to end and since we do NOT know when this will happen, isn’t it obvious that we should live in readiness? Our impatience should be with ourselves, not with God. “Without spot or blemish” refers back to 2:13 where he uses these words as part of a description of false teachers who are: “stain and defilement.” In other words, don’t be like those evildoers! To be “at peace” is telling them to be in a state of friendship with God.

Mark 1:1-8

This is the beginning of the Gospel of St. Mark who was a teenager when he followed Jesus. His mother was a wealthy widow who owned a house in Jerusalem where the first Christians used to gather; the same house where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper and instituted the Holy Eucharist. It is probable that the Garden of Olives also belonged to her and that would explain why her son was there when Jesus was arrested. Mark is thought to be the

young man who ran off naked from the garden that night. He became a friend and companion of Paul and later was a secretary for Peter whose mind and memory are especially reflected in this book. "Son of God" is Mark's favorite title for Jesus whose miracles and teachings substantiate this claim to divine Sonship and the Father announces it publicly at his Baptism and Transfiguration.

1The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way.

3A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"

Mark outlines the mission of John and Jesus by splicing together three Old Testament passages: Ex.23:20 recalls how Yahweh appointed a messenger (angel) to lead Israel from the slavery of Egypt to the safety of the Promised Land. Is 40:3 projects this memory from the distant past into the future, announcing that both Israel and the nations will experience a New Exodus in the messianic age. Preparations are in order for a new Deliverer, the Suffering Servant, who will bring the nations from the darkness of sin and idolatry to the light of Mt. Zion. Mal 3:1 warns Jerusalem that the coming of the messianic Lord will mean disaster if the shepherds of Israel are unprepared to welcome his arrival. These passages are linked together by a common call to prepare the "way" of the Lord: John is the herald who points out the "way" of this New Exodus, while Jesus is the "Lord" and Suffering Servant who accomplishes it. This is the only time Mark quotes directly from the OT as the Gospel narrator.

4John the Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This baptism of repentance doesn't just mean, "I am sorry." It actually required a change of attitude and behavior, but it was NOT a sacrament, rather, it prefigured the sacrament of Baptism. John and Jesus were cousins, born six months apart in towns that were in sight of each other. Tradition has it that Mary was present at the birth of John for she was visiting his parents, Elizabeth and Zachariah. John was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the witnesses to Jesus. He was beheaded by Herod Antipas.

5People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. The Jordan River is the main river in Palestine. The Israelites crossed over it to inherit the Promised Land and it was here that Naaman the Syrian (a Gentile) was cleansed of leprosy. Against this historical background, John's ministry prepares for the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles by the Messiah.

6John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. Garments of animal skin were the distinctive attire of Old Testament prophets. Locusts were one of the few kosher insects that God permitted the Israelites to eat under the Old Covenant. This detail portrays John as faithful to the Torah and highlights his renunciation of worldly comforts. His disciplined life-style also included fasting.

7And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. Removing and carrying sandals was a menial task reserved for slaves serving their master. John regards himself as unworthy to perform even a slave's task for the Messiah.

8I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." These are the last words recorded of John who is spoken about but does not speak again.

Some of the material for this commentary has been taken from the "Catechism of the Catholic Church," Aelred Rosser's "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2005," "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: "The Gospel of Mark," and The Navarre Bible: "St. Mark."

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.