

First Sunday in Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 33: 14-16

As you may recall, Jeremiah conveyed God's messages to the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, during the forty-plus years prior to its being carried off into Babylonian Captivity. These messages were calls to **repentance**, warnings of **punishment** for continued apostasy, and **restoration** to a repentant people. It is this **last** with which today's message deals. In particular, the Lord here promises to **fulfill** the promise that he had made to the **houses of Israel and Judah**. What promises were those? They occurred during the reign of King David over **both** the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This was right after King David, with the help of King Hiram of Tyre, had finished building King David's **palace**. King David then **lamented** out loud that, while he lived in a house of **cedar**, God still lived in their midst in a **tent** (the tabernacle). So he commented to the prophet Nathan that he was going to build a house for **God**. But that night, God revealed to Nathan that **David** was **not** going to build a house for God, but **God** was going to build an **everlasting** house for **David**, referring of course to the eternal kingdom of the Promised Messiah (see **1 Samuel 7**).

The remainder of today's Old Testament reading becomes a **prophetic** description of that promised king **and** his kingdom: he will be a descendant of **David, righteous** in all his ways, executing **justice** and righteousness, **saving** his people and allowing them to dwell **securely**. This prophecy obviously reaches its full realization in that **everlasting** kingdom, but the **coming** of that Messiah, to be known as "**the Lord is our righteousness**," will give us peace **today!**

Epistle Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

As you may recall, St. Paul established the church in Thessalonica during his **second** missionary journey to Asia Minor, after they were driven out of **Philippi** after casting a **demon** out of a fortune teller who had been plaguing their ministry. Now he is writing his **first** letter to them, expressing his love for them and his desire to **come** to them again. And, based on Timothy's report to St.

Paul on the Thessalonians' faith, St. Paul expresses joy and thanksgiving to God for their **faith**. Then he prays that God would cause **love for one another** to increase and abound, and that they would establish themselves in **righteousness and holiness** in **preparation** for the **coming of the Lord Jesus** for all his saints.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 19: 28-40

It has been a tumultuous few weeks before the Passover. Yes, **that** Passover, the night in which Jesus would be betrayed. Jesus had raised **Lazarus** from the dead, resulting in the people turning away from the scribes and Pharisees and turning to Jesus. But **why** were they turning to **Jesus**? Because he was healing their **sick**, raising the **dead**, casting out **demons**, and feeding the **thousands**. In other words, providing them with all of their **earthly** needs. And **why** were they turning away from the **Pharisees**? Because the **Pharisees** were working hand-in-glove with the Roman authorities; after all, their jobs depended on it. But the people were **chafing** under the rule of the Romans, and they still entertained the notion that, since **they** were God's **chosen** people, **they** should be ruling the Romans, and for that matter, the **world**, thus restoring to them **their** everlasting kingdom.

And so, when Jesus **comes** to Jerusalem, riding on a **donkey**, which the disciples had procured in the exact manner that Jesus said they would be able to, the people **erupt** in **triumph** as they anticipate the arrival of the person **they** assume will be their **military** leader and political **king** through whom God would restore their **earthly** kingdom. Fearful for their jobs and jealous of Jesus, the Pharisees demand that Jesus **stop** the welcoming committee from praising him as **King**. But even though the crowd was welcoming Jesus for the **wrong** reason, Jesus points out to the Pharisees that even the **stones** would shout for joy if the people did not, because the **stones** knew **why** Jesus was **really** coming to Jerusalem: to save the world from its own **sin**.

Alternate Gospel Lesson: Luke 21: 25-36

It is early in the week. Yes, **that** week, Holy Week. Jesus is in Jerusalem with his disciples. He has had his usual encounters with the Pharisees, who question his **authority**; and the **Sadducees**, who think that they can successfully challenge him about a resurrection of the dead and a life in the world to come. When the disciples comment to Jesus about the beauty of the **temple** that King Herod had built, Jesus responds that it is going to be **leveled**. Astonished, the disciples quickly ask when this is going to happen, and what will be the **signs** of the end times. Jesus again responds by noting that at **the** end of time, the very **heavens** will be in turmoil as the sun, moon, and stars are shaken. But before that, the earth will be experiencing one **calamity** after another as **nations** are in turmoil, and people are in **fear and panic** with not only what is happening but what is anticipated will happen. After **that**, everyone will see Jesus coming in power and glory, so that at **that** time, his people will be able to lift up their heads again with anticipated **joy**.

Then Jesus directs his disciples to use **common sense**: when they see **leaves** starting to appear on trees, they know that summer is **near**. Likewise, when all of these **calamities** are taking place, Jesus' disciples will know that his **coming** is near. But then Jesus issues a **warning**: his disciples are not to let the **cares** of this world or **material desires** burden them, because if they focus on **themselves**, they will fall into a **trap**. Jesus will **come**, but they will be **unprepared** for his coming. Besides, they need to remain in **prayer** in order to have the (**spiritual**) strength to deal with the calamities of those times.

Third Sunday in Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Zephaniah, an apparent descendant of the generally righteous King **Hezekiah** of Judah, was called into the prophetic ministry by God after a series of kings who brought the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, into **apostasy**. The reign of King **Josiah**, the **last** righteous king of the Southern Kingdom, had just recently begun, with King Josiah trying to **restore** worship of the true God. In today's reading, we find God—**through** Zephaniah—announcing good tidings of great **joy** to the people of Israel and Judah (here referred to as Jerusalem): **restoration** through the arrival of the **King of Israel**, the **Lord their God**, who will shower his **love** upon them, take away the **judgments** levied against them, remove **fear** from among them, **gather** them together, and restore their **dignity**. In addition, he will **heal** the sick, disabled, and distressed; restore their **fortunes**, and make praise and **recognition** a characteristic of the people.

Obviously, that King is **Jesus**, the righteous Son of God. But who is **“Israel?”** And what kingdom will Jesus reign over? As St. Paul makes clear in **Romans 2-4**, and **Galatians 3 and 6:16**, Israel is **not** Jewish people by **genetics**, but people who become a **Christian “Jew”** by **faith**—the faith of **Abraham**. So Zephaniah is speaking of the joy that will come to **all** people because Jesus will **save**, indeed save **everyone** who **believes**, from the eternal consequences of their sin. Consequently, there is no more fear of **judgment** or the fear of **evil**, no more **oppression**, because Jesus will reign over an **everlasting, heavenly** kingdom. Good news indeed!

Epistle Lesson: Philippians 4: 4-7

As we recall from last week, St. Paul is in prison, writing to the church in Philippi which he had established during his **second** missionary journey. And you will also recall that St. Paul expressed his **love** for that church and was full of **joy** and **gratitude** for their demonstration of their Christian faith. In turn, in today's reading, St. Paul encourages these Philippians to **rejoice** continually in the Lord Jesus, and without **any** anxiety to make known their needs to God through **prayer and supplication**, but with **thanksgiving**. In these circumstances, God will be able to provide a **peace** that exceeds **anything** that they can imagine, thus **reassuring** their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And that is what St. Paul is encouraging **us** to do today, and **every** day.

As we think about it, doesn't this sound like a **fulfillment** of Zephaniah's **prophecy** that we heard just a few minutes ago?

Gospel Lesson: Luke 7: 18-28 (29-35)

Since Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus has been tempted by the **devil**, his home town of Nazareth has **rejected** his spiritual leadership, and he has cast out **demons**, healed the **sick**, forgiven **sins**, gathered **disciples**, and appointed his twelve **apostles**. If **that** were not enough, he has healed the sick of the **Gentiles**, raised the **dead**, and given sight to the **blind**. But also in that time period, Herod Antipas has put John the Baptist into **prison** for accusing Herod of an adulterous relationship with Herodias, his wife, who was Herod's brother's wife previously.

As our reading for today begins, we find John's disciples reporting to him **all** what Jesus is doing. So John sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask him whether he **really is** the expected Messiah. Now, don't you find that **curious**? Wasn't it John who announced Jesus as the **Lamb of God** who takes away the sin of the world, upon whom the Holy Spirit descended upon and stayed at his baptism, clearly indicating to John that this was how John would be **assured** by **God himself** that this would be the Messiah (**John 1:29-34**)? Maybe what is **really** happening is that John realizes that his **death** is near, so by sending his disciples to Jesus to get this critical question answered, **they** can become **Jesus'** disciples. When John's disciples pose this question to Jesus, he doesn't answer it right away. Instead, he heals **more** sick, casts out **more** demons, and gives sight to **more** blind, fulfilling the prophecy of **Isaiah (35:5-6)**.

After John's disciples leave to report to John, Jesus turns to the crowd and asks a series of rhetorical questions concerning who John is. Then Jesus

answers his questions: not only is John a **prophet**, he is **the** prophet who was prophesied to be the forerunner of Jesus (**Malachi 3:1**). So John is the **greatest** of the Old Testament prophets. But the **New Testament** covenant relationship that God is now establishing with believers is so much **superior** to the Old Testament covenant that the **least** in this new

covenant relationship is **greater** than John. You have to think about that, folks, because if we believers are **greater** in God's kingdom than the likes of the men and women of faith mentioned in **Hebrews chapter 11**, God's **expectations** of us must be pretty **high!**

But then Jesus addresses the people of **his** generation, and asks what **they** are like. He answers the question: they are like **children!** Because they **criticized** John for his austere diet, but at the same time they were criticizing Jesus for **not** eating an austere diet. In other words, no matter what the **righteous** do, they will always be **criticized** by the unrighteous, who will always be **offended** no matter what the righteous say or do.

And isn't that **just** like it is today?

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Old Testament Lesson: Micah 5: 2-5a

Micah was a prophet for the Lord to the **Southern** Kingdom, or **Judah**, during the time that **Isaiah** was also a prophet for the Lord to the Southern Kingdom. Micah began his ministry approximately at the time that Ahaz became king of Judah, **King Ahaz** was to the Southern Kingdom that **King Ahab**, some 130 years earlier, was to the **Northern** Kingdom, both leading their kingdoms into **apostasy**. Micah's ministry followed that of God's other prophets, announcing **judgment** on the evil, but **restoration** to those who repented. In particular, the early parts of the book of Micah find him warning of judgment upon the **nation**, particularly upon those who **oppressed** their fellow men, and upon the ruler and prophets who were abusing their **offices**.

But as our reading for today begins, we find Micah instead announcing tidings of great **joy**: from the tiny village of **Bethlehem** of Ephrathah (or **Judah**) would come the one who would become the King of Israel, the Lord **himself**—indicated by the description of his being from **ancient** days. But up until that time, God will allow the Israelites to be ruled by **others**. When that king is born, he will gather **all** of his brothers (meaning Jews **and** Gentiles) to him and will shepherd them in **one** flock (see **John 10:16**). And this one flock will rest **securely** and in **peace** under that shepherd's watch.

Epistle Lesson: Hebrews 10: 5-10

In **chapters 8 and 9 of Hebrews**, the author has explained how Christ offered his blood on the altar in **heaven** to redeem the souls of **all** mankind, provided that the individual **accepts** Christ's sacrifice. As we begin chapter **10**, the author indicates that **all** of the sacrifices required by **The Law** did **not** actually take away sins. In fact, these sacrifices and offerings were not even **desired** by God, but were instead merely a **picture** of the sacrifice that had to be made by Jesus. Consequently, a **body** for that sacrifice was prepared for Jesus, and Jesus came into the world **specifically** to do God the Father's will, as written in the **Book, or Bible** (here called a scroll) long before (see **Ephesians chapter one**). When Jesus made that sacrifice of himself, he in effect did away with the **first** covenant,

as represented by the **Law**, and replaced it with a **second** covenant, as represented by **faith**, in which an individual is declared sinless when he or she accepts Christ's sacrifice, which needed to be made only **once**, since that **one** sacrifice covered **all** sins of **all** time.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 1: 39-45 (46-56)

In the first part of **Luke, chapter one**, we have the recounting of the story of the **angel Gabriel** appearing to the priest **Zechariah** to announce the coming pregnancy of Zechariah's apparently barren wife, **Elizabeth**, who would bear the forerunner of the Christ, **John the Baptist**. Then we have the recounting of the angel Gabriel, six months later, appearing to **Mary** to announce that **she** will be the bearer of the **Messiah**, which assignment she humbly and obediently accepts. As our reading begins today, we find Mary setting out into the mountains to share this good news with her relative Elizabeth. What is truly amazing is that, as **soon** as Mary enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist, as a **six-month old fetus**, recognizes the presence of **Jesus** in the now pregnant Mary, and leaps for **joy** in the womb of Elizabeth. Immediately Elizabeth is filled with the **Holy Spirit**, enabling her to recognize that Mary is pregnant with the **Messiah**, the **Son of God**. Elizabeth then praises Mary for **believing** what the angel told her, and notes that Mary will be **blessed** for participating in the fulfillment of a prophecy made at the time of Adam and Eve.

Mary responds to these words with a song of **praise** which we know as the **Magnificat**, in which she praises and rejoices in God who chose her, a **humble** girl. She then continues to praise God by recognizing his **holiness**, his **mercy**, his **strength**, his **justice** in humbling the **proud** but exalting the **humble**, his providing for the **poor and hungry** but denying the **rich**, and his **faithfulness** in remembering the promise of a messiah that he had made to the fathers, including Abraham and his offspring.

The Nativity of Our Lord—Christmas Eve (24 December)

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 7: 10-14

King Ahaz of Judah, the subject of this evening's lesson, was the son of the righteous King Jotham. King Ahaz, who started to rule around 740 B.C., unfortunately, did **not** follow in his father's footsteps: not only did he follow the idolatrous worship of the kings of **Israel**, but he also sacrificed his son by burning him **alive**. When God allowed the kings of **Syria and Israel** to attack him, he and his people began to be fearful. It was at this point that God sent **Isaiah** to King Ahaz to tell him that God would **fight** for him and **defeat** these two armies—another example of God reaching out to this ungodly king in order to encourage him to **repent**. To reassure him even more, God asks King Ahaz to ask for a **sign—anything** he wanted—that God should do to convince him that God would **indeed** defeat the armies of Israel and Syria. Amazingly, King Ahaz **refuses!** It is then that God says that **He** will provide a sign—a sign for **all** people: a **virgin** will conceive and bear a son who will deliver **all** people from their slave master—**sin**, thereby bringing a freedom that had not been experienced even during the days of Kings David and Solomon. Furthermore, the name of this son would be **Immanuel**, meaning **God with us!**

Epistle Lesson: 1 John 4: 7-16

St. John is addressing this letter most likely to the **Gentile** Christians in Asia minor. His themes include adhering to the **faith**, maintaining a correct view of our **spiritual** selves, **discerning** the anti-Christ in its various forms when it presents itself, **abiding** in God, and **loving** one another. In this evening's lesson, he expands on this love, noting that since God loves **us**, **we** ought to love one another. So **if** we love one another, that is evidence that God abides in us. However, if we do **not** love one another, that is evidence that we do **not** love God.

Then St. John notes that our **testimony** is that God sent his Son to be the **Savior** of the world. And whoever acknowledges that Jesus **is** this Savior, God abides in **him/her** and he/she abides in **God**. This then leads to the **bottom line**: Since God is **love**, whoever abides in **love** abides in **God**, and **God** abides in **him/her**, giving him/her confidence for **Judgment Day**.

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 1: 18-25

In this reading, St. Matthew records the circumstances that result in the fulfilling of the prophecy spoken by God through ***Isaiah***, as just read in our Old Testament Lesson. But as we read this series of events, we need to be aware that God chose the ***two people*** that were to be the human parents of his Son ***very*** carefully. These two people trusted God ***implicitly***. How so? Recall that Mary is engaged to Joseph; in God's eyes, that meant that they were ***already*** married but without consummation of the marriage. If someone wanted to break an engagement, a ***divorce*** would be required. But when Mary consented to becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit, she technically could be considered an ***adulterous*** woman—unless she had been raped out in the country where no one would have heard her cries for help (***Deuteronomy 22:25-27***). So these are the possibilities that would be running through Joseph's mind when he learns that Mary is pregnant. Joseph could have assumed a ***self-righteous*** stance and called for Mary's ***stoning***. But instead he just plans to divorce her ***quietly*** without making Mary an ***example***.

That is, until one of God's ***angels*** appears on the scene. The angel tells Joseph ***not*** to hesitate in taking Mary as his wife, and makes Joseph aware that Mary's pregnancy is from the ***Holy Spirit***. In addition, the child is to be called "***Jesus***" because he will save his people from their sins, *i.e.*, is the ***Messiah***. Without registering a single doubt, Joseph ***proceeds*** to take Mary as his wife (*i.e.*, brings her home to his house and starts living with her) but ***without*** having intercourse with her until ***after*** she has given birth ***and*** has completed the days of her purification (see ***St. Simeon's Day, 2 February***).

First Sunday After Christmas

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 13: 1-3a and 11-15

The tenth and **last** plague has ravaged Egypt. The Children of Israel were spared from the death of **every firstborn** of man or animal by **obeying** God's instructions for the celebration of the **Passover**. Now, after exactly 430 years, the Children of Israel leave Egypt, led by Moses. But God does not want the Children of Israel to **forget** his mercy shown toward them in this particular circumstance, and he does so in a unique way. And it deals with how the Children of Israel, from now on, deal with the **firstborn** male of either man or animal. And it works this way.

Every firstborn male of an animal is **claimed** by the Lord. That meant that it was to be **killed**. The single exception was in the case of a **donkey**—a valuable beast of burden. Here the Lord gave the Children of Israel two options: they could either **redeem** the donkey by sacrificing a lamb in its place, or they could **kill** the donkey. In the case of a firstborn **man**, he **had** to be redeemed by the sacrifice of a **lamb**, since the man was to be consecrated to the Lord by his **life**, not his death.

Epistle Lesson: Colossians 3: 12-17

During his **third** missionary journey, St. Paul traveled from Corinth to Ephesus and established a church there. He apparently spent three years in Ephesus, **teaching** the new Christians as well as **evangelizing**. During this period, he made contact with people from **Colossae**, with the result that a church was established there as well. Subsequent to St. Paul leaving Ephesus in order to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem, he was arrested and was forced to appeal to **Caesar** in order to get a fair trial. He is now imprisoned in **Rome** and is spending his time writing letters to some of the churches that he founded, one of which is in Colossae. In this letter, St. Paul emphasizes that Christ has **redeemed** them from the **consequences** of their sin. But, he notes, **if** they have been redeemed, **then** their behavior should **reflect** that fact. What **behavior** would God expect his redeemed to show? St. Paul lists some of them:

- **Compassion, kindness, and humility.**
- **Meekness, patience, and bearing with** one another.
- **Forgiving** each other, and **showing love** to each other,

- Letting Christ's **peace** rule in their hearts, and being **thankful**.
- Feasting on God's **Word** so that they can teach and admonish one another.
- Singing **songs, hymns, and spiritual songs** with **thankfulness** to God.
- Letting every **word and deed** be done in the way that Jesus would have.

This might be a good starting list for us as well.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 2: 22-40

St. Luke has described the **birth** of Jesus and his **circumcision** on the eighth day, at which time he was officially given the name of Jesus. But now, Joseph and Mary bring Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord as the **firstborn** male, but also to make the required sacrifice of a lamb (or, in the case of a family that could not afford a lamb, a pair of mourning doves or pigeons) to complete the **purification** of Mary 40 days after the birth of a male child (**Leviticus 12:8**).

But God has a **surprise** waiting for the family. A devout and righteous man in Jerusalem, named **Simeon**, has been **waiting** for the coming of the Messiah. And God had told him that he would **not** see death until he had seen the Messiah with his **own eyes**. So on this day the **Holy Spirit** leads him into the Temple, **just** at the time that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus appear to offer the required sacrifices. Simeon is led to pick up Jesus and **bless** God by exclaiming that he now can die in **peace** because he has seen with his own eyes the Promised Messiah for **all** peoples, because he will bring the revelation of God's salvation to the **Gentiles** and will be the glory of Israel. But then Simeon addresses **Mary** by saying that Jesus' life will result in the rising and falling of many in Israel, a sign of **opposition** to the established but **unrighteous** religious leaders, their hidden thoughts being revealed; and with Mary feeling like a **sword** has pierced her heart as she watches her firstborn son crucified.

Moments later, the prophetess **Anna**, married for only seven years and a widow of 84, who worshipped, fasted, and prayed in the temple day and night, appears to the family and gives **thanks** to God, saying that Jesus is the **redeemer** for whom the Children of Israel have been waiting. Subsequently, the family returns to their original home town of **Nazareth**, in Galilee, where Jesus, **untouched** by sin, grows up, becoming strong and filled with **wisdom**, because God's **favor** was upon him.