

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
December 3rd, 2017 – First Sunday of Advent
Mark 13:33-37

Each year God creates a new year. In the Catholic Church this new year begins with this first Sunday of Advent. The expectation is that during this coming year some new opportunities might come our way. The Spirit of God is always active, inviting us to be a part of what St. Paul called "the new creation." Thus, we are invited in today's gospel to be on the watch. Be alert to new possibilities. One of Pope Francis's favorite images is that life (with all its many parts) is a *gift from God*. Each year is a gift. Each day is a gift. Each moment is a gift.

When Mark's gospel was written, there was a widespread expectation among the early followers of Jesus that Jesus was returning a second time. This belief gave rise to many reactions. Some were hopeful because his first coming didn't seem to change much. Israel remained under Roman domination, so there was no obvious political change. People still had to work hard to survive, so the great prosperity that many had hoped for didn't come either. So, a rumour circulated that Jesus was returning "to finish the job."

It's now about 2,000 years later and some are still expecting a miraculous return of Jesus. Although, given the temper of our times, many are saying that this time Jesus will come with anger and wrath.

You may wonder what the Catholic Church says about this, so here's a mini-lesson on this matter. Obviously, the first coming of Jesus has already occurred. We celebrate that historical event each year on Christmas. And based on descriptions in the New Testament, there will be another coming of Jesus at the end of time. When this will be we simply don't know. From time to time, someone states that they know. Occasionally, they even give a date. All have been wrong.

But there's a third kind of coming and today that's where we should focus our attention. Be on the *watch* for the coming into your life of Jesus in the form of an elderly relative, an anxious spouse, a confused teen, a lonely neighbor, a fearful child. Or it might even be you who needs attention. Christ Jesus is with us. Christ has come, is coming and will come again. So, watch! Be alert! New opportunities will come with this new year. Be ready to respond whenever appropriate. Jesus awaits.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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December 10th, 2017 – Second Sunday of Advent
Mark 1:1-8

God wanted to help us understand our own lives by the way things were organized around the life of Jesus. In other words, pay attention to those who are immediately called to help in the Incarnation, when God became one of us.

First of all, God used Mary *BIG TIME* to bring about God becoming human. God didn't fall from the sky in some dramatic fashion that would amaze the world. No, God involved a young peasant woman who lived in a small village in a backwater part of the world. Nothing particularly dramatic about that.

Then there was Joseph (a favorite of mine and Pope Francis, I should add) who was a simple carpenter, who was honest and caring and was likely indistinguishable from neighbors and friends in Nazareth. Just an ordinary Joe.

And then we come to today's focus, John, cousin of Jesus, who was called by God to "prepare the way" for the public arrival of Jesus, Son of God, Creator of the Universe, Saviour of the World. John the Baptist got the call to be the one who would point the way to the grand entrance of God among us, the arrival of God in our midst.

So how does John do this? By inviting people to correct their sinful lives, to turn away from selfishness and greed, to admit their need for God. Repent and believe the Good News - a phrase sometimes used on Ash Wednesday. In other words, they were called to free themselves from what closed them off from receiving God into their lives. If we are filled with only our own interests and our own desires, there will be no space in our lives for God or neighbor.

This may not have been what many were hoping for. I once had a scripture professor who said that neither John the Baptist nor Jesus promised "two cars in every garage and a chicken in every pot." They did offer, however, a much better life of peace among us and justice for all. Although God would require our help to accomplish this. God uses ordinary people like Mary, Joseph and John (and you and me) to make God real in this world. John the Baptist reminds us that if we open ourselves to God, "clean up our act" as some say, God will definitely come to us.

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December 17th, 2017 – Third Sunday of Advent
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Today we hear another story about John the Baptist. He is at the Jordan River doing his thing (baptizing) and a group of inquirers is traveling from Jerusalem (religious headquarters) to find out if he is the Messiah. (note that the word, *messiah*, means "the one sent from God." Of course, back then, the Jewish people were hoping for the Messiah, the unique Messiah, the one described (however vaguely) in their Scriptures, the one who would make them a great nation and fulfill all their expectations (which varied depending on who you consulted). Might it be John himself?

John informs them that "No, he is not the Messiah." But there is one already in their midst who is. But he won't tell them anything more. These seekers return to Jerusalem with one answer (it's not John) and with another (we must keep looking). Of course, if you are reading this, you know the rest of the story. You know who the Messiah was and is, namely, Jesus Christ.

But there's another side to this story that is worth thinking about. What if you were seeking to find another messiah, where this designation simply means "one sent by God?" Does God send other people to us besides Jesus?

Are there people among whom we live who have been (in general) sent to us from God? If you are a parent, what about your children? Did God send them to you? If you are married, what about your spouse? Did God have a hand in their coming to you? What about friends and neighbors, or even strangers? Any "messiahs" among them?

Life is filled with mystery about what we might call "a deeper meaning." We can relate to others, or even to ourselves, on a surface level. We notice people's appearances, their habits, their behaviour, their idiosyncrasies. We can say much the same about the way we view ourselves. But can we can also wonder about what might be there *beneath the surface of things*? Might we see more in the light of our Christian faith? For instance, see others as part of the great puzzle that forms each of our lives with God? And wonder if some people might have been sent to us from God (however one might imagine this)? If so, might we look at them in a different way, a deeper way, as God sees it?

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December 24th, 2017 – Fourth Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:26-38

Luke describes the most important event in the history of the world almost as casually as if he were giving a daily weather report. Granted it comes from an angel (who better to know the atmospheric conditions in the clouds?). But think about the scene Luke describes. A young woman is quietly minding her own business when suddenly she is not alone. A messenger from God (that's the meaning of the word, *angel*) is with her. And she is immediately fearful and alarmed. Wouldn't any of us respond in similar fashion?

Then comes the message: God favors you and God wants you to conceive a son whom you will name Jesus. He will be called the Son of God. Mary is baffled! Wouldn't any of us be? Mary's confusion deepens. Yet she has the courage and the wits to ask about how this will happen since she is a virgin. The angel clears this all up. The Holy Spirit will make this happen so don't worry about that part. Still, no clarity. Mary likely wonders whether this is all a dream. But it isn't. Mary ponders all this. The angel waits. What is Mary to do?

Of course, we know she agrees to do her part that is implied in this request from God. Again, Luke downplays the drama by simply reporting that Mary says, "Yes." I will do it. If this is what God wants, let it happen. I agree.

And with her agreement, the history of the world changes to becoming a place where God is suddenly here, physically here, personally here. But not in a palace, or in a major city. No, in a quiet village, an out-of-the-way place, in a seemingly ordinary young woman named Mary. Imagine that!

Because we have heard this account hundreds of times, we might easily let it quickly pass through us. As we say, in one ear and out the other. Unlike Mary, we don't ponder this event or let its incredible meaning astound us. Maybe because its literal truth is so astounding, we dismiss it and keep it at a distance. Don't!

Because of Mary's willingness to let it happen in her, God dwells among us. Through our Baptism, God's Spirit also comes to us and we become places where God dwells here on Earth. Mary reminds us of this today. Like Mary, welcome that presence.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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December 31st, 2017 – Feast of the Holy Family
Luke 2:22-40

The fourth joyful mystery of the rosary is called "the presentation." It recalls the time when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to "present" him to God. For the Jews, this was an act of faith in God. All children, as Luke puts it, were to be consecrated (made holy) by being offered to God. After all, God is the ultimate source of all life. But something rather wonderful happens when the Holy Family enters the Temple. And it has to do with two quite old people.

Again, just like his account of the Annunciation (the first joyful mystery of the rosary) Luke is rather matter-of-fact in his telling of the event. These two devout Jews, Simeon and Anna (Luke even tells us that she is eighty-four widow, well beyond retirement) are waiting there in God's house, the Temple, for ... what? Luke says he was awaiting "the consolation of Israel" and she was awaiting "the redemption of Jerusalem." In other words, the coming of the Messiah. They were not to be disappointed. They both met the infant Jesus who had been brought there by his parents.

There are many ways we can understand this gospel narrative. First, Mary and Joseph were good Jews. They lived in accord with the guidance given them by their faith. They complied with the custom of bringing their child to be presented to God in the Temple. Surely, a long and difficult journey in those days.

And here's a second point. Jesus is presented not only to God but to those who hoped that they would see something of God's doings before they died. Imagine what life was like for Anna, that quite elderly widow. All those years of patient waiting in hope. In the end, as Luke notes, she was not disappointed.

The Creed states that Jesus came "for us and our salvation." God's act in Jesus was not self-serving. God did not become human to be served, but to serve us. The ordinary settings described in the early years of Jesus are not insignificant. He lived in a small village with parents who did what all parents did: care for their children and make a living. When he did something out of the ordinary, like the presentation event just described, Jesus connected not with the High Priest or other temple dignitaries, but with two ordinary people. For God, the ordinary is extremely important.

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