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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-28-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. . This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which we study a prophecy about the coming Messiah that was fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Then we move to the second reading from First Corinthians where we study Saint Paul's teaching on marriage of Christians. Finally, we return to the Book of Mark for the Gospel lesson where we see Jesus heal a demon-possessed man.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy. At this point in history, the people of God (the Hebrews) were entering the Promised Land after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They were in need of structure and direction, so that their new life in the Promised Land would be fruitful and safe. It had been many generations since this people group had been able to make their own decisions and govern themselves. Therefore, God gave them a strong leader called Moses and some thorough instructions, recorded here in the book of Deuteronomy. This Book primarily records the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. There are several big ideas behind God's giving of the Law. First, the Law established a new covenant with the Hebrew people called the Mosaic Covenant. This Covenant between God and the Hebrew people included promises that were conditional in nature. The Mosaic Covenant consisted of ordinances which included moral laws, civil laws, and ceremonial laws for God's chosen people, the Jews. The Law also expanded the already existing promises

granted by God in the Abrahamic Covenant into a new covenant referred to as the Palestinian Covenant. Although the promises made in this Covenant were unconditional, the Jewish people will not fully obtain them until the Lord Jesus returns to rule and reign on the earth. A second aspect of God's giving of the Law provided a means for God to hold people judicially accountable when they break the law. Saint Paul explained this in Romans Chapter 4 by saying, "when there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). Finally, since Moses was himself a prophet, the Law also included prophecy, as we will read about in the first reading as follows below. *Note: We have included the last two verses in Chapter 18 that were omitted from the reading in order to provide the full meaning and context.*

First Reading:

15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. 16 This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.' 17 The LORD said to me, 'They have spoken well. 18 I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. 19 It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. 20 But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' 21 "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' 22 "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him." (Deuteronomy 18:15-22)

As the Hebrew people were on the brink of newfound freedoms, this passage guided them so that they would discerning of those who claimed to speak for God. The reading pointed out several things. First, God promised to Moses that He would raise up a Prophet like himself (v. 17) and provided stern words about the importance of listening to the future Prophet. God warned that there is accountability for failing to listen to the true Prophet (v. 10 "require it of him"). Second, in verse 21 God also provided a test for any person that claimed to be a prophet. If a person claims to be a prophet, they must not speak on behalf of a false god and whatever they say must come true. If the self-proclaimed prophet fails either of these two tests, he must be put to death.

The Old Testament is full of prophecies from God-ordained prophets who spoke on behalf of God and called people back to their covenant relationship with God. We know from the New Testament that the final Prophet whom Moses predicted in verse 15 was none other than Jesus Christ Himself. The proof for this fact is found in three places in the New Testament, once in the Gospel of John and twice in the Book of Acts. Nathaniel said in John's Gospel, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote–Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). Peter quoted Deuteronomy 18:15 in Acts 3:22, and Stephen in his famous speech he made just before being

martyred said about Jesus, "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN" (Acts 7:37).

Let's discuss briefly the importance of recognizing false prophets in our own day through the application of the prophetic test given in Deuteronomy 18. First, the New Testament authors warned about the coming of false prophets. John said, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Peter said, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves" (2 Peter 2:1). If false prophets will abound, how are we to respond to these false prophets? We have a story in Acts 17 that illustrates the answer to this question. It says: "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

Paul was so bold in another letter as to say that even if he came back to them and changed the message of the Gospel or they had a special appearance from an angel, not even that should persuade them from the sure foundation that was already laid. He said, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" (Galatians 1:8-9).Therefore, our response is very clear. We must be diligent to study God's Word so that we can test what people are saying and discern whether they are a true prophet (speaking the Word of God) or whether they are a false prophet (speaking presumptuously). These are strong words, but as we study God's Word we will be able to reject false teaching when we encounter it.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's teaching on the value of a person's singleness during this period in the church when it was undergoing explosive growth and at the same time, persecution – especially from the Jews. These verses have often been used to elevate singleness over marriage. But as you understand the context of unbearable famine and persecution for the church, we see that Paul was putting a temporary moratorium on weddings, in order to help them endure the unusual circumstances that these believers were facing. *Note: Verses 36 – 38 were included in order to provide the full meaning and context.*

Second Reading:

32 But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; 33 but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. The woman who is

unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. 35 This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. 36 But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. 37 But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well. 38 So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. (1 Corinthians 7:32-38)

The fact that the Old Testament and other places in the New Testament affirm the beauty and value of marriage needs to give perspective to the interpretation of this passage. For example, Paul recommended that young widows remarry (1 Timothy 5:11-15) and Jesus Himself affirmed the Old Testament teaching that a man shall leave his father and mother to be united to his wife (Matthew 19:5). In the present crisis (mentioned in 1 Cor. 7:26), Paul was giving them apostolic teaching that applied wisdom to their dire situation. First, Paul said that if a person is single they can be wholly dedicated to the service of the Lord, whereas a married person is also concerned with the affairs of their mate and family (vv. 32). In times of persecution and famine, it is much easier to be single than married. The simplicity of life when one is in survival mode is complicated when a spouse and children are brought into the picture and their vulnerabilities can be exploited by persecutors. Second, he said that if a person desired to marry that there was nothing wrong with their desire (v. 35). What he was saying was that at this time in the church it was strongly advantageous for a person engaging in ministry to remain single, like he was. This is the path that Jesus and others in the New Testament chose, including Saint Paul. Finally, Paul said that fathers should not unduly guard their daughters in such a way as to prevent them from fulfilling their desires to marry (vv. 36 – 38). During that cultural context, the father's approval of the marriage meant everything. This is of course still the case in many cultures in the world.

What does this mean for today? Since the rest of the counsel of Scripture affirms the sanctity of marriage, we must not look at marriage as a better or worse state of affairs. There are advantages and disadvantages to both singleness and marriage. If you are single, you currently have the gift of singleness (1 Cor. 7:7). If you are married, you have the gift of marriage. Will you let God use either state of affairs to further His work in your life?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter one which continues from last week. Here we find Jesus in His adopted hometown of Capernaum, the home of Peter where He called His first disciples among the fishermen in this lakeside village.

Gospel Reading:

21 They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. 22 They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, 24 saying, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are–the Holy One of God!" 25 And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" 26 Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." 28 Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee. (Mark 1:21-28)

Several points arise from the text. First, early on in His ministry Jesus is widely accepted in the synagogue in Capernaum as a rabbi, or teacher. The text says, "He entered the synagogue and began to teach. They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (vv. 21b – 22). This is an extremely important point because later on when the religious leaders began contesting His teaching they pointed out that He was just a carpenter from Nazareth. They said, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him" (Mark 6:3). This hearkens us back to the passage from Deuteronomy, which gave a prophecy about a great Prophet and criteria for discerning whether someone was speaking on behalf of God. Jesus passed the tests (and then some), but the religious leaders failed to hold up their end of the bargain. They refused to listen to the words of the Prophet and will have to stand to give an account for their rejection of God's Messiah. Jesus spoke with authority because He was The Authority!

A second important point from the text is what the demonic spirit within the man in the synagogue said about Jesus. The demon recognized Jesus as being from Nazareth and the "Holy One of God" meaning Messiah (v. 24). Although the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus as Messiah, the demonic spirit was compelled to testify as to His identity. One day, "every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). Finally, God used the testimony of the demonic spirit in order to further the spread of the Gospel (vv. 27 – 28). Each one of us will have to decide how to respond to the authority of Jesus. Will we reject His authority or surrender to it?

As believers, we too can speak with the authority of God, following Jesus' example and being filled with His Words. Anytime we recite Scripture we possess the authority of God and have power within the range allowed by God's sovereignty to unset spiritual darkness. Keep this in mind the next time you encounter spiritual darkness including false teaching. You can apply the test for a true prophet that we learned about from Deuteronomy, as well as speak the truth from the words of Scripture into confusing and dark issues. Although we may not have all of the well-reasoned answers to spiritual skeptics, if we know the Word of God we can respond with God's authority simply by applying the truth of Scripture to each encounter.

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This week one of my relatives is being forced to take a hard stand at her school. Her coach has decided to get around the rules regarding the frequency of athletic practice allowed for this particular conference by scheduling "open gym" periods with the team. In theory, these events are optional but in reality, any player missing one of the open gym periods would be in jeopardy of harming their standing on the team. This particular team player has decided to abide by the rule and miss this informal practice session in order to satisfy the calling that God has placed upon her heart to be obedient to Him. Although our study of the Word of God can sometimes be rather abstract in terms of application in our daily lives, in this case it became clear to this person from God's teaching that they needed to take a stand. Is there anything in the Bible study lesson this week that caused a "prick in your heart" about which you need to take a stand for God? In what areas in your life have you been exposed to false teachings and need to exclaim that these sources are accursed?

Reflection Questions

1. Think about some of the concepts covered in this week's Bible reading:

    - Being discerning about who I listen to and rejecting false teaching
    - Being obedient to true teaching (that lines up with Scripture)
    - Being wise about how I think about marriage and singleness
    - Surrendering to Jesus' authority
    - Standing up to misuse of authority by using Scripture as my authority

Which of the above concepts do you need help in? Talk to God in prayer about how you would like for Him to be at work in this area.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-21-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Jonah who wrote about events that happened just before the Northern Tribes of Israel were taken captivity by the people about whom he was writing. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and then close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Jonah. Jonah was a Prophet who came from the region near Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The context of the reading is the fulfillment of God's call to Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach to his foreign Gentile enemy. You may be familiar with what transpired in the first two chapters before Jonah finally obeyed God. His disobedience included getting on a ship going in the opposite direction at which point a fierce storm arose that threatened the lives of all of those on the ship. The sailors threw Jonah overboard where he was swallowed by a great fish. After being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights it finally vomited him up on the shore. This is where we enter the story. *Note: All of the verses in the range from 1-10 have been included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading:

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. 4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. 6 When the word

reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 9 Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." 10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it. (Jonah 3:1-10)

What does this story teach us about God, the human condition, and our life in the world. First, we see that God is a God of second changes. Verse one says, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the **second** time." Second, God is a God of compassion and mercy. He sent Jonah to Nineveh as a mission of mercy to inform the people that Nineveh was going to be destroyed. Thirdly, we learn that God rewards faith (Hebrews 11:6). Verse 5 says that the Ninevites believed God and showed that in their actions. Fourth, we learn that God responds to their repentance by not destroying them. Finally, we learn that God's plan of salvation extends beyond the Jews to the Gentiles (Jonah 4:11).

Jonah was reluctant to bring this message of salvation to the Gentiles who were also his enemies. This story provides insight to the human heart. Even though Jonah had received a direct revelation from God as a prophet, he was at first unwilling to share that message with those whom he deemed unworthy. There is a little bit of this in all of our hearts, it is called spiritual pride. In contrast to Jonah's hard heartedness we see the surprise responsive hearts of the Ninevites (Gentile enemies of Israel). The Lord is no respecter of persons. We have this concept corroborated in Acts 10, "Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). The story of Jonah reminds us to reflect God's heart, which loves all people (John 3:16).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is that Paul is answering questions that the Corinthian church had asked him. In this particular section, he deals with marriage, singleness, circumcision, and buying one's freedom from indentured servanthood. This passage relays the criteria for making decisions that drastically changes one's life.

Second Reading:

29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; 30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; 31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

The criteria for making life-changing decisions is to have an eternal perspective. Paul gives certain

examples about what that may look like for the Corinthian people. He is not encouraging singleness for the sake of holiness or an emotionless existence. He is saying however that we must view our circumstances in light of an eternal perspective. If this world in its present form is passing away, how now shall we live?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Mark Chapter 1. The context is immediately after Jesus' baptism and subsequent temptation by the devil in the desert.

Gospel Reading:

14 Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." 16 As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." 18 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 19 Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him. (Mark 1:14-20)

This passage records the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that includes His message and the calling of His messengers. First, His message is one of good news, which is what the word "gospel" means. Jesus came to let people know that it was now time for them to respond to His invitation to enter into the kingdom of God. Instead of the kingdom of God being far away and only for a few elite people, Jesus let them know that the kingdom of God is actually among them (v. 15). The proper response to this good news is to repent, which means to turn from their sin, and believe in the gospel. This is the same response He asks from each one of us today.

The second part of this passage is the calling of His messengers. Simon, Andrew, James and John were all hardworking fishermen. Jesus invited them to be His disciples, which meant leaving their nets and following Him. In the case of James and John, this also meant leaving their father in the boat to carry on the family business without them. Jesus' disciples were not rabbinic students but were rather common tradespeople who would have been considered unclean by the religious authorities.

What we can see about God's heart from this passage is that He reaches out to the least likely candidates. First, Jesus proclaimed the Good News to the common person. One would believe that the Messiah would choose an elite class of religious leaders who show great promise in leading the kingdom. Instead, just as we saw in the first reading, God is no respecter of persons. The prerequisite for life in the kingdom is repentance and belief, not religious pedigree. In addition, God chose the lowly to be His representatives.

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In my life, I have had to reconsider my beliefs regarding who would or would not come to believe in Jesus Christ. I worked in a state prison where I saw convicted criminals give their heart to the Lord that provoked deep change in their lives. Someone who would have been manipulative and self-seeking became trustworthy and sacrificial. One man in particular was a practicing Muslim and had even adopted a Muslim name. Over the years, his heart became softened and one day another of the professors led him to express faith in the Lord Jesus. This is just one example of people who are often marginalized by the Christian society thinking that they will never come to the Lord. How we treat people is a reflection of God's heart for them and that He wants all men to come to the knowledge of everlasting life in Him (2 Peter 3:9).

Reflection Questions

1. As we saw in the lesson the word "gospel" is a word that means "good news." Do you see the message of the Bible as good news? If so, how is the kingdom of God being "at hand" good news in your life? How might this be good news to others in your life? Is there anyone with whom you would like to share the good news of Jesus Christ this year?

2. In the first and last reading we saw how God is no respecter of persons; He does not show partiality. How does the fact that God reaches out to the hearts of people who we may consider unlovable and impossible to reach challenge your beliefs about sharing your faith with others? Are there people that you are quick to judge? Pray that God would open your eyes to their potential and change your heart so that you can reflect His generosity in bringing unlikely people into the kingdom.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-14-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of First Samuel in which we learn about God's calling of this important prophet. Then we move to Saint Paul's First letter to the Corinthians and close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John. I included a brief story about a personal struggle I was having that is very common among men, which I hope encourages all Christians to be pure in their daily lives. We also include this week a more detailed study at the end regarding understanding our identity in Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of First Samuel. The context is the commissioning of the Prophet Samuel in the era of the period known as the Judges. This was the period of time when the history of Israel followed a pattern of rising and falling. God would allow His people to fall into the hands of their enemies, next the people would repent and God would raise up a deliverer. After some time in freedom, the people would become complacent again, the cycle would repeat. This was also the era in which the people "did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25) versus following the commandments of the Lord.

Note: Many verses were omitted in the reading. Since this is a more comprehensive study of the Scriptures we have included all of the verses between verses 1 and 19.

First Reading:

1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD before Eli. And word from the LORD was rare in those days, visions were infrequent. 2 It happened at that time as Eli was lying down in his place (now his eyesight had begun to grow dim and he could not see well), 3 and the lamp of God had not

yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was, 4 that the LORD called Samuel; and he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, lie down again." So he went and lay down. 6 The LORD called yet again, "Samuel!" So Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he answered, "I did not call, my son, lie down again." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor had the word of the LORD yet been revealed to him. 8 So the LORD called Samuel again for the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli discerned that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down, and it shall be if He calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Then the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." 11 The LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. 12 In that day I will carry out against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them. 14 Therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever." 15 So Samuel lay down until morning. Then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. But Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16 Then Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." 17 He said, "What is the word that He spoke to you? Please do not hide it from me. May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the words that He spoke to you." 18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD; let Him do what seems good to Him." 19 Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fail. (1 Samuel 3:1-19)

This is the story of young Samuel's initiation into the office of Prophet. He wasn't familiar with how the revelation of the Lord was going to come since "the word of the Lord was rare in those days" (v. 1). At first, Samuel didn't recognize God's voice and instead thought that it was Eli the high priest who was calling him. Finally, Samuel listened to the Lord and, as a result of what God told him, he had to convey a very difficult message to Eli. This must have been a challenging task and a sort of test for this young man to undertake since what Samuel told Eli was very somber news. Samuel had to convey the message that nobody in Eli's family line would continue in their priestly duties forever (14). God had already revealed to Eli that there would be judgment upon him for his lack of restraint on his wicked sons (1 Samuel 2:27-36). This was the final confirmation that the prophecy would come to pass. As a result of all of this, God officially confirmed Samuel as a prophet as we see in the closing verse 20 (not included in the reading. "All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD" (1 Samuel 3:20).

Some important lessons that we learn from this passage include:

- God will fulfill His promises, whether they be blessings or curses. If this is the case, a point of application is to be aware of God's promises and live in light of these realities.
- God spoke through the prophets to disclose ultimate reality for those of us who are finite.

While this might have felt harsh at the time, it was actually for humankind's good to know the Truth. Some of the prophetic utterances were divinely inspired to became part of our Holy Scriptures (1 Peter 1:21). These Truths can be heeded or rejected while we are here on earth. But God discloses these ultimate things so that we might live as wise people here and now.

- Because we can trust God's Word, it's important for us to study in light of the truth He has revealed to us. We see this in Samuel's life as he learned to listen and even to do difficult things in order to follow God's voice.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Saint Paul wrote this letter in response to several matters that were happening in the church including sexual sin, improper celebration of communion, and lawsuits between believers. This particular section is focusing upon the sexual liberties that some people were taking. The City of Corinth was known for temple prostitution and all forms of promiscuous sexual practices related to pagan worship. Some of these people were now converted and part of the church but did not understand proper behavior in light of their new status in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Paul gives the overarching principle for a believer's newfound freedom in Christ in verse 12. Then he explains a particular application of that freedom. *Note: The intermediate verses that were omitted in the reading have been included in order to provide the full meaning in context.*

Second Reading:

12 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. 13 Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. 14 Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! 16 Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, "THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." 17 But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. 18 Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)

There are three overarching principles that Paul uses to help Christians be discerning about the choices that we make. First, when contemplating one's freedom in Christ, we must consider whether this helps or hinders our relationship with God (v. 12). Paul said that all things are permissible for him but not all things are beneficial (v. 12). The second main point is that when we are united in Christ we are one with Him in Spirit; therefore, when we sin we drag Him into any sinful patterns that we engage in (v. 17). This should help us to consider how our choices affect Christ, not just

ourselves. The third overarching principle to help us be discerning in our freedom is the fact that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit; therefore we are to honor God with our bodies (19-20). All of these points put together provide a very strong deterrent when we are attempted to go back into immoral and sinful patterns. We are not only encouraged to resist sexual immorality but Paul actually calls us to flee from it.

Way back in 2002 I was leading a Bible study and I made an offhanded comment about how all of us are hypocrites at heart in one way or another. After class a woman who heard my comment gently confronted me about this comment and said, "No, not everyone is a hypocrite and you were wrong in making that statement." Her words cut me to the heart because like David who was confronted by the Prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1-13) I was deeply disturbed by her words. This was because at that instant I realized for the very first time in my life that I had been addicted to viewing pornographic images for many years. After I left the class I poured my heart out to God and a strange thing happened. Over the course of the next several weeks I realized that my attraction and compulsive desire to look at pornography was gone. Two weeks went by without an incident, then three, then a month, then two months. After about six months I began to think that I needed to take precautions in my life because even though God delivered me it would be possible for me to go back into the cycles of viewing pornography, which involves feeling bad about it and destroying it, staying away from it for a week or two, then inevitably returning to it to begin the cycle all over again. These cycles were actually very similar to what we read about in the first reading in the era of the judges. I am very thankful to the work that God did in my life on that day in 2002, and greatly respect the woman for the courage that she showed in confronting me that day.

People, and especially men, fly around like insects and get caught in webs: lies, pornography, alcohol, stealing, and lusting after loose women. Are we so naïve to think we are like the bees who have stronger wings and can brush through these webs without getting caught in them? Unlike the cobwebs that we just brush off as we walk by, we cannot do this so easily with the complex webs (temptations) that we live in today. For many, these webs may start out only as an annoyance, slowing their progress, but later on they become like glue, binding them. God tells us "For the power of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). "And lead us not into temptation" (Matthew 6:13 you read every week in Mass, you may not realize that God really does provide the power to you to stop your sinful, compulsive behavior, whatever it may be. God stands at the door ready to deliver us from our temptations, and I am living proof. If you are struggling with your own temptations and not feeling any relief I urge you to connect with a brother or sister in the Lord and confide in them about the struggle that you are having. Then turn to the Lord in prayer, together, and outright ask for God to deliver you from your temptation. I don't know how He will respond, but you can be guaranteed that He will answer your prayer in the best way possible for your benefit.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 1. The context is Jesus' gathering of His disciples after His

baptism by John the Baptist. From this passage, we see that John the Baptist and his disciples recognized Jesus' identity as Messiah early on during His ministry.

Gospel Reading:

35 Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. 38 And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" 39 He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). 42 He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). (John 1:35-42)

John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus, declared that Jesus was the Lamb of God (v. 36). He understood that Jesus' mission as Messiah would entail becoming the atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world (v. 29), thus becoming the sacrificial lamb of God. Even though Jesus had never gone through formal "rabbinical training" they still recognized Jesus as a rabbi. The word means "teacher" (v. 38). One of the first disciples was Andrew who found his brother Simon and told him about his discovery of the long-awaited Messiah. It is very significant that when Simon recognized Jesus as Messiah one of the first things He did was to announce a name change for Simon to Cephas. This almost indicates a type of covenantal relationship with Peter that consisted of a name change and Jesus obvious vision of who Peter would became later in his ministry, the "rock." While Peter did not characterize rock-like qualities throughout the Gospels, Jesus called him by his new name, thus calling him to a higher level of living than what he had previously known.

Reflection Questions

1. In our age, God speaks primarily to us through His revealed word found in the Holy Bible. Reflect upon the young Prophet Samuel's first experience in hearing the word of God. In what ways are we like the prophet in not hearing the word of the Lord?

2. Each of the readings this week point to the fact that God has a vision for who we can become if we surrender our lives to Him. Samuel became the prophet, the Corinthians became purified, and Peter became the Rock.

What are some things that you have been given a sense as to a specific calling that God has for you?

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Perhaps someone has told you that you are especially good at something. Or perhaps God has placed something on your heart? Would you pray about setting some goals this year about acting upon this calling?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-07-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah which is a picture of the coming of the Messiah and the eventual acceptance of Him by all of Israel. Then we move to the second reading from Ephesians in which we see the revelation of the mystery of the church, that salvation had come through Jesus for both Jewish and Gentile believers. Finally we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew in which we study the visit of the magi to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The context is a continuation of his prophecy regarding the redeemed Israel after the Nation's full acceptance in the Messiah we know as Jesus Christ. In the previous chapter God told the Jews, "A Redeemer will come to Zion, And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," declares the LORD" (Isaiah 59:20). When the Messiah comes, God said about Him that "My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring, . . . from now and forever" (Isaiah 59:21). God said that eventually all of Israel would recognize the Messiah. "So they will fear the name of the LORD from the west And His glory from the rising of the sun, For He will come like a rushing stream Which the wind of the LORD drives" (Isaiah 59:19). Until then, the Messiah is a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6), the primary people that form the Church – with the exception of the few "completed Jews" who have believed. Jesus is a light to all of the nations during the church age, a period unforeseen by the Prophets (Ephesians 2:3-6), as we will see in the second reading. This Light is the only means of salvation, both for Jews and Gentiles alike (John 14:6, Romans 1:16). Until Israel is awakened to the reality of Jesus Christ as their Messiah, darkness will continue to reign in their hearts along with the rest of the unbelieving people in the world.

First Reading:

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness will cover the earth And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you And His glory will appear upon you. 3 Nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms. 5 Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you. 6 A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)

After a prolonged four-hundred-year period of darkness, Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, the light that shined upon the world. Isaiah predicted that Gentile leaders from the nations would bring gifts of gold and frankincense to the newborn King, something we will read about later in the Gospel message that happened with the visit of the magi. Perhaps most striking in Isaiah's message was further insight into the nature of God's provision of salvation. It would be for the whole world, not just for the Jews. God said that "Nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising" (v. 3). Like many prophecies in the Old Testament about salvation, the reading today has an "already, not yet" sense. God has already provided His salvation to all who believe, both for Jews and Gentiles. During the church age, which is a mystery not seen in the Old Testament, God provides salvation to everyone who will believe (Romans 1:16). However, in a future day all of Israel will come to believe (Romans 11:26). It is interesting to note that Isaiah's prophecy did not include the giving of the third gift, that of myrrh. As we will see in the Gospel lesson, this gift was also given to Jesus during the visit of the magi. Myrrh is a substance used in the preparation of a body for burial. This

provided an insight about the nature of Jesus' ministry, that He would have to give up His life for His sheep (John 10:15).

We can read this now with the perspective of a prophecy that has been fulfilled by Jesus' first advent, in that He claimed to be the Light of the world (John 8:12). The question for us is whether or not His light fills our lives. If not, we are still in darkness, lost and alone in the world. If we want Jesus' light to fill our lives, all we must do is ask. He will begin to work in our lives, helping us to become who the Father wants us to be. Then we will be part of those who come to Him to worship Him and so fulfill the prophecy "And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians we will see more about this mystery of the church of God. The context is Paul's message to the Gentiles that salvation has come to them through Jesus Christ. *Note: Verses 1, 3b, and 4 which were skipped in the Mass reading were included in order for you to obtain the full meaning from the complete context.*

Second Reading:

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles– 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, (Ephesians 3:1-6)

Paul explained to the Ephesians the mystery of the church, that salvation had come both to the Jews and also to the Gentiles through the revelation of the Gospel (good news) brought about by the apostles and prophets (like Paul). The mystery is profound, that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (v. 6). As we move onto the Gospel lesson we can catch a glimpse of the drama that was unfolding in the universe as Gentile magi from the east recognized Jesus as a king in fulfillment of ancient prophecies while the majority of the Jews missed the significance of His majestic birth.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel message is from Saint Matthew and is the record of the visit of the Magi from the east while Jesus was yet an infant and still in Bethlehem before his family had to flee to Egypt because of the threat from King Herod. The context is that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem and his parents had moved him out of the stable into a house. He was an infant, less than two years old. We can see this from Herod who later in Matthew made a plan to kill all infants two years old or younger. The "magi" were likely people from the Babylonian region along the Euphrates River in

present day Iraq south of Baghdad. They were educated people that were part pagan priest, magician, and scribe. They were also interested in astrology and this was woven into their mystical religious beliefs. According to what we know about the ancient beliefs of the magi and people like them, they would have seen this prophesy of a star as that of a coming ruler, a new King. When the star appeared in the sky to them back at their home somewhere in the east they began planning this journey to locate the new King! Evidently the magi either had some contact with Jews in their region or they had this prophesy handed down through some other source (maybe through Daniel and other Jews who were part of the Babylonian captivity hundreds of years prior to this). Nowhere in the text does it say that there were three of them, this comes from the three gifts. There were likely a small group of them but they would have been accompanied by a large number of guards and servants. This would have made their arrival that much more disturbing to King Herod, who was the current King of the region. He wasn't a Jew but was actually an Edomite (or called an Idumean), one of Israel's ancient enemies. We can trace the region of Edom back to Esau who lived there, but it is probably even older than that. The best one word description for Herod would be the word "scoundrel" because of the way he dealt with the people. Herod bought his way into the throne by paying off the Roman government. He was so bad that he had one of his wives executed and also just before he died he executed his son!

Gospel Reading:

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him." 9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)

God gave the magi revelation to locate the Messiah through their understanding of the Jewish Scriptures, and they responded to this information by journeying a great distance to present gifts to the newborn King. They went to the most logical place where a King should be born, the capital city and seat of power. But when they arrived in Jerusalem, the newborn King was nowhere to be found.

The Jewish scholars were consulted and they revealed that the place of the King would be in an unexpected place, a little town of Bethlehem. Matthew quoted the prophecy about which the magi were made aware from the Prophet Micah some four hundred years before the birth of Jesus. "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). The Jewish scholars may also have been made them aware of another prophecy in the Book of Numbers regarding a sign in the sky. "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth" (Nu 24:17). The magi, unlike most of the Jews, recognized the validity of these predictions and acted upon it when they saw the sign in the sky.

As the story played out, King Herod, who pretended to be interested in worshiping the newborn King was only trying to get information in order to murder him. Later in Matthew's Gospel we find out about Herod's evil plan to locate the Messiah and kill him, something which God thwarted through having the holy family flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:16-18). After the magi had gathered untold information from the Jews, they continued following the star until it stood overhead at which point they found the Child, Jesus in Bethlehem. The immediate response of the magi was first to "rejoice exceedingly with great joy," second to present three royal gifts, and three to worship the Lord Jesus (vv. 10-11). At the closing of the story they were directed by God not to return to King Herod so they went back to their country another way (v. 12). These gifts were very valuable and through God's insight provided the means for Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt to avoid King Herod's attempts to murder Jesus. As we said in the first reading, the last of the gifts was something that was prophetic of Jesus' ministry. Myrrh was something that was used in the preparation of a body for burial. Even though Mary was told about the suffering that she would experience in her life because of Jesus (Luke 2:34-35) she likely never connected the giving of the myrrh with what would happen to Jesus until after He had given his life for the sins of the world.

What does all of this mean for us today? First, God calls **us** to believe and follow His revelation about Jesus. It's not just enough to believe in certain things about Jesus (James 2:10), we are called by God to act upon our beliefs and to follow Him. This means forsaking our old way of life (Ephesians 4:22) and walking on the narrow road following the ways of Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:25-30). Second, when we do believe and follow Jesus our inherent response to God is joy. We may not always be happy, but we will find deep and meaningful joy that is rooted in having peace with God. Finally, when we believe and follow Jesus another response is to fall down and worship Him and respond in giving. During the Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of Jesus we commemorate this historical event by giving gifts to one another. However, the larger picture is that as followers of Jesus Christ our response to the truth of the Gospel message is that God has implanted within us a heart of generosity. Therefore, we can live in the spirit of Christmas all year round.

As we begin a new year, we often think of the past year and how we want to be strategic with the year ahead. We often make resolutions for changes, contemplate goals that we to accomplish and try to wash the slate clean of past mistakes. While these are all noble pursuits, they are not enough to

provide the type of life that we were meant to live. Jesus said that he came to give us a different sort of life than one of merely trying harder and forcing ourselves to do things that don't come naturally to us. He came to change our lives, to give us new intentions in our hearts, so that we would want to become a new type of person, one who has love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Instead of making a New Year's resolution on your own strength that will probably get broken in the next few days, why not talk to the Lord and ask Him to make you into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)? Why not take the plunge and lean your full weight on Jesus by asking Him to give you His light for each step of your journey in this New Year? Are there decisions you need to make? Are there relationships that seem chaotic? Are there places of greed or anger that need to get confessed? Why not spend some time talking to Jesus and asking Him to be Lord of your life, to cleanse you of the past and to give you His light for the future? He's willing, are you?

Reflection Questions

1. The Magi diligently searched for the king based upon the information they obtained from various sources including the Scriptures as well as from speaking to the Jews to inquire about where they may located the baby Jesus. What is the primary means that God provides for us to locate Jesus today? During the New Year, how will you make an effort to continue to search for the truths about Jesus in this primary source during your daily life?

2. In what ways can you relate to this summary statement of today's Gospel message?

"God calls us to believe and follow His revelation about Jesus and when we do our response is joy, worship and giving."

Believe:

Follow:

Respond:

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What People are Saying about Mass Notes



{module 226}

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-31-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Genesis 21. Next, we look at two readings for the second reading, one from Hebrews and the second from Colossians. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

There are two first readings, either from the Apocrypha or the Book of Genesis, we will cover the one from Genesis. The reading is from Genesis chapters 15 and 21.

The context of the reading is the promise and the fulfillment of the promise by God to Abram (later called Abraham) regarding the birth of a son. This firstborn son of Sarai (later called Sarah) was the son of promise through whom all of God's blessings would flow. Although God did also bless Abram's first son born through his servant Hagar, God told Sarai that this son Ishmael would be a "wild donkey of a man" (Genesis 16:12). The future Arab nation came through Ishmael, whereas the Hebrew people through Isaac. The conflict between the two sons and two people groups continued later with the birth of Jacob and Esau as recorded in Genesis 25. Here God told Rebekah (Isaac's wife), "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). God made promises regarding both the godly line of Isaac / Jacob as well as the carnal line of Ishmael / Esau.

First Reading:

1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give

me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:1-6)

1 Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. 2 So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. 3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. (Genesis 21:1-3)

In the first passage, we see that Abram was concerned that he did not have an heir. However, God comforted him by telling him that he would not remain childless. God promised to give him a son that would eventually start the line of descendants that would outnumber the stars (v. 5). They key verse is "Abraham believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). This is an important point that Paul brings out in the Book of Romans that salvation is by faith and not by works (Romans 4:3). This story is important to us because it clarifies the foundation of a people saved by faith in God. We are part of the offspring of Abraham when we walk by faith, as Abraham is the father of all who believe (Romans 4:16).

In the second passage, we see the fulfillment of God's promise made to Abram, now called Abraham. Sarah bore Isaac in her old age, something that was impossible but was not too difficult for God. You can imagine how hard it would be to believe in God's promises when it seems so impossible. But now they experienced the reality of God's blessing through the birth of Isaac, the child of promise. Likewise, God calls us to live by faith and His promises even when the feels the odds are against us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

There were two passages given this week for the second reading, we will cover each of them. The second of the readings was from Hebrews chapter 11. Hebrews 11 is known as the "hall of faith" in which is recorded the faithful actions of godly men throughout biblical history beginning with the father of faith, Abraham.

Note: We included the intermediate verses that were skipped in the reading.

Second Reading:

8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as an alien in

the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. 13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18 it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19 He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Hebrews 11:8-19)

We see in this passage of God has commended Abraham and Sarah for their faith. In the beginning of this chapter we find that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). With all of these examples including Abraham who is the father of faith, we find inspiration for our own journey of faith in God. Abraham was called out of his own land to go to a place that God would show him. He didn't have a map of God's plan but walked in faith day by day of what he did know. Then God promised him a son after Sarah was beyond the age of childbearing. By faith Abraham believed that God could perform this miracle. As we read earlier, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. When we walk by faith in God we are living as Abraham's children.

The other of the first readings was from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians.

12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. (Colossians 3:12-21)

Looking at the full context of this reading, we must understand that we first "put off" the old man

because of who we are in Christ. Paul said in the opening of this chapter, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). That is a big "if." This passage is conditional upon a having a heart that has been changed by God (John 3:3, born from above). Paul continued, "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). After putting off the "old man" with its practices (v. 9), we are to put on the new man as explained by Paul in the reading. Paul culminates the list of things to "put on" by describing how love is the anchor for these good character qualities that we see in this passage. He said, "Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (v. 14).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from the second chapter of Luke. The context is the Mary and Joseph's following of God's law to have their newborn son Jesus circumcised on the eighth day of His life on earth.

Gospel Reading:

22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS." 25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel." 33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed– 35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul–to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." 36 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. 38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. 40 The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. (Luke 2:22-40)

In the opening verses, Mary and Joseph were fulfilling the requirements of the Law that called them to provide a sin offering in the temple 41 days after the birth of Jesus. Next, Simeon comes into the story as man of faith of faith that patiently waited for the fulfillment of God's promise through the birth of the Messiah. Four hundred years had passed from the time of God's last revelation during which the Jews waited for the fulfillment of the promises. This time of silence was suddenly broken with the various miraculous events surrounding the birth of Jesus. This story tells of yet another miraculous outpouring of God's spirit of prophecy through Simeon and Anna. Simeon's prophecy focused upon Jesus being God's salvation prepared for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. He also prophesied to Mary about the grief she would bear over the Child's destiny. Anna, who was a prophetess, also verified that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

What do all of these things mean for us during this Christmas season? First, we can be confident that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. He is the One who provides salvation to all people. Like Simeon, Anna, Abraham, and Sarah who waited almost their entire lives to see the fulfillment of God's promises we too need to remember to be patient and wait for God's fulfillment of His plan in our own lives. This means that even when we encounter extremely difficult circumstances we can still trust that God is working behind the scenes and will finish the good work that He has begun in is (Philippians 1:6). In this Christmas season if you are having a difficult time finding joy amongst the celebration, you can turn to Jesus who is the "consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25).

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we read how Abraham patiently waited for the fulfillment of God's promises. In what ways do you identify with Abraham and Sarah who waited for the fulfillment of an impossible promise? How does their story of faith give you direction and hope for your own journey of faith?

2. In the second reading, Paul provides a list of qualities that flow out of being set apart and loved by God that should affect how we live our lives. How does being "holy and beloved" (Colossians 3:12) change how you approach relating to God, yourself, and others? Re-read the list of character qualities (Colossians 3:12-21) and consider how each of them are expressed relationally in your own life.

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Second Samuel chapter 7. Then we move to the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans and conclude with the Gospel lesson from the Gospel of Saint Luke. Christmas is only one from this Sunday's lesson so we pray that all of you have a very Merry Christmas.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Samuel. This is the second Book following First Samuel, and was originally one Book until the separation made by the translators of the Greek Old Testament known as the Septuagint. First and Second Samuel were written by an unknown author and chronicled the events from the birth of the Prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1-28) until the last words of King David (2 Samuel 23:1-7). First Samuel opens with a description of the corruption of the Levitical priesthood (1 Samuel 2:12-17) and the threats from Israel's main enemy the Philistines who captured the Ark of the Covenant (1 Samuel 4). One of the main things that happened in these two Books was the pronouncement by God of the Davidic Covenant. This is the Covenant which is God's promises to David made through Nathan and found in 2 Samuel 7, the text of today's reading.

Note: The intervening verses that were skipped in the reading were included below in order to provide the full context and meaning.

First Reading:

1 Now it came about when the king lived in his house, and the LORD had given him rest on every side from all his enemies, 2 that the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells within tent curtains." 3 Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in

your mind, for the LORD is with you." 4 But in the same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying, 5 "Go and say to My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD, "Are you the one who should build Me a house to dwell in? 6 For I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt, even to this day; but I have been moving about in a tent, even in a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have gone with all the sons of Israel, did I speak a word with one of the tribes of Israel, which I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?'"' 8 "Now therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel. 9 I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth. 10 I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, 11 even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you. 12 When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, 15 but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."'" (2 Samuel 7:1-16).

According the rules given the Moses the Lord's dwelling place was in the tabernacle, but King David desired to build a temple for God (v. 2). Nathan the Prophet told David instead that the Lord would make a house for him (v. 11) and that his descendent (whom we know was his son Solomon) would be the one to build the temple of God (vv. 12-13). The promises from God to David as relayed by the Prophet Nathan included first, that David would have rest from his enemies (v. 11), that his descendent would build a temple of God (vv. 12-13), and finally that the "throne of David" would be established forever (v. 13 b). We understand that after God later revealed the mystery (as we will see in the second reading), the One who would sit upon the throne wasn't King David's son Solomon, but the Lord Jesus Himself. Verse 14 is a description of Jesus' Second Advent, the coming rulership of Jesus during his coming earthly reign as we see confirmed by Revelation 12:5, "And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne." Israel is the one who gave birth to Jesus, and at His First Advent He was taken up into heaven (Acts 1:9). Jesus is the One that will sit on the Throne of David. Although Mary was the earthly host of Jesus, He was born as a child of the Nation of Israel, "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 12:1). Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews, and through the mystery of the church the Messiah of the Gentiles as well.

As you were reading the verses from 2 Samuel, it can be confusing as to whether the author was speaking about King David or the coming Messiah, the Son of David. The people in King David's era

hearing about Samuel's prophecies may have desired to see David's greater son and believed that somehow Solomon would reign forever. However, Jesus is the One called the Son of David. In the opening of Matthew's Gospel Jesus is called the Son of David (Matthew 1:1). Later in Matthew Chapter 9 two blind men called out, "Have mercy on us Son of David" (Matthew 9:27). Even those that doubted knew Jesus' identity. At one point after Jesus had performed great miracles the crowd called out, "this man cannot be the Son of David, can he?" (Matthew 12:23b). When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the crowd cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9). Jesus had a messianic title, and was the One to whom was promised His reign would endure forever (2 Samuel 7:13).

As we celebrate Christmas tomorrow, this is the Royal Person that we commemorate being born in the manger, where all ceremonial lambs are born. After Jesus' resurrection, He "sat down at the right hand of the Father" (Hebrews 10:12), "having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time" (ibid). He is "waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET" (Hebrews 10:13). "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:13). Paul said that salvation is a free gift that comes through faith. "8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). No matter how hard we try, Jesus' work is still finished for us. We walk in the strength of God's power for His purposes as we see in the very next verse of Ephesians. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). As believers we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, as Paul said in Chapter 1 of Ephesians. "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). These are the spiritual truths that we are celebrating during Christmas.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading from the closing version of the Paul's Letter to the Romans, we see that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus was the fulfillment of a great mystery that wasn't understood until after He came. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was something that was hidden in the former times, but is now understood, a mystery revealed by God through Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 16:25-27)

The Good News (or Gospel) is appointed as a light to all the nations (v. 26d) which leads to the obedience of faith (v. 26e). Although this was a mystery in the ages past (v. 25b) it was manifested both by the many prophetic verses in the Scriptures and through the voice of the Prophets as we saw in the first reading. Paul said more about this mystery Ephesians:

2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; (Ephesians 3:2-5)

The salvation of the Gentiles through Jesus' sacrifice and the church age was a mystery that wasn't revealed until after Jesus came. Although the prophecies were there concerning the in-grafting of the Gentiles into God's kingdom (see for example Isaiah 56:6-8 "foreigners," the salvation of the Gentile Rahab in Joshua 2:9-11, the salvation of the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah). Isaiah was more explicit about this coming salvation for the Gentiles. He said about Jesus, the Root of Jesse, "And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, And His resting place shall be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10). Again, these are the spiritual truths that we celebrate during Christmas

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Luke and records the miraculous event of the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary.

Gospel Reading:

26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; 33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. 36 And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Many points arise from the reading. First, Mary is called the "favored one" in verse 28. She said about herself later in this chapter, "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondslave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed" (Luke 1:48). One can hardly imaging the calling which God placed her to be the bearer of the Son of God. In the reading, God called Mary who found favor with God who was to be the bearer of God's Son Jesus who would through the "ark" (see below) of His bodily sacrifice save the world from their sin. Jesus was conceived not through normal human means but through the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 34). Mary, was obviously very perplexed at all that was happening and called out to the Angel to explain these things (v. 34), who was more than glad to do so. Second, Mary's Son would be called "the Son of God" (v. 35) and the Lord would give to him the throne of David (v. 32), the fulfillment of the prophecy that we saw in the first reading. Finally, Mary (and Joseph) were obedient to God in naming their Son Jesus, and Mary promised her obedience to God by calling herself "bondslave of the Lord" (v. 37). By the way, Jesus is from the Hebrew name "Jeshua," which means "the Lord is Salvation." Jesus is the salvation of the entire world, which is why we are so pleased to celebrate His birth on Christmas.

Noah, who came centuries before, was also called "blessed", and it was through the righteous and faithful acts of Noah that the world was saved from the flood. God said, "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). Noah built an ark to save the people of the world from the wrath of God that was to literally be poured out through the Flood. The Blessed Mary on the other hand, bore the Son of God to be the ark of salvation for all who would believe. These similarities between Noah and Mary are important because they show how these two people were obedient to the difficult callings that God placed upon their lives. Although it's okay to ask questions when we discern the calling that God places upon **our** lives, it's also crucially important as believers to carry out His instructions.

While many of us are already familiar with the narrative concerning the birth of Jesus, this passage highlights important truths for our lives. First, Saint Luke brought out the fact that Jesus was born not through natural human relations but through the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. This is important because since God is without sin this was the only means by which the sinless God-Man could come into the world. Second, since the virgin birth was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy we can trust other prophecies that speak to areas of our life and ministry. This includes things like how the second coming of the Lord will play out, how the world will be eventually unified under Jesus' earthly reign. Third, Jesus was sent to save His people from their sins. This is God's special invitation to counteract the destructive nature of sin in order to stand before a Holy God and not be rejected at the judgment. This is not only "a" plan for salvation, it is "the" plan. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

May you and your family have a very Merry Christmas.

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Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, what began as a promise that David's son (we know as Solomon) would build a temple for God (v. 13a) expanded into a throne that would endure forever (v. 13b). The temple is a place where people gather to worship God, and in the Old Testament was a place inside of which God's Spirit dwelled. We know the ruler of the temple is Jesus forever, but how can the throne of the temple endure forever, when we know that it was destroyed in 586 BC and again in AD70?

2. In light of your answer to the first question, read what Saint Paul had to say in the Letters to the Corinthians. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1Corinthians 6:19). "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). "And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people'" (2 Corinthians 6:16).

How would you change your answer in light of the spiritual truth that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit on which Jesus is (and will) reign forever?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-17-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah and then move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally, we close with the Gospel lesson John's Gospel concerning John the Baptist.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 61. The first verse and a portion of the second were the ones that Jesus read from while He was teaching in the temple as is recorded in Luke 4:18. It is important to note that Jesus stopped reading halfway through verse two because the subsequent verses dealt with His Second Advent. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see this, although His listeners would not have been able to catch this important detail (see for example John 12:16). The verses in question (2b – 9) were omitted from the text of the reading covered in the Mass, although we have included them below in the section that is separated by the blank line. These intermediate verses (2b – 9) won't be fulfilled until after the church age when God pours out His judgment upon the earth during the tribulation period of the end times. As you read this Old Testament prophecy from the Prophet Isaiah you can almost imagine Jesus standing in the temple proclaiming His Word.

First Reading:

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; 2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD

Omitted section:

And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, 3 To grant those who mourn in Zion, Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. 4 Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations; And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. 5 Strangers will stand and pasture your flocks, And foreigners will be your farmers and your vinedressers. 6 But you will be called the priests of the LORD; You will be spoken of as ministers of our God. You will eat the wealth of nations, And in their riches you will boast. 7 Instead of your shame you will have a double portion, And instead of humiliation they will shout for joy over their portion. Therefore they will possess a double portion in their land, Everlasting joy will be theirs. 8 For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering; And I will faithfully give them their recompense And make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Then their offspring will be known among the nations, And their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them will recognize them Because they are the offspring whom the LORD has blessed.

10 I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise To spring up before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:1-11)

God revealed to Isaiah some important truths about the ministry of the Messiah Jesus. First, the Spirit of the Lord would dwell upon Him (v. 1). This truth is corroborated in the New Testament by eye witnesses to Jesus' baptism during His time on earth. The baptism of Jesus was recorded in three of the four Gospels. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist said this about Jesus' baptism: "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him" (John 1:32). Jesus, as God in the flesh, was in union with both the Spirit of God and God the Father as we find in the chronicle of Jesus' baptism. Saint Matthew detailed the event as follows. "After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased'" (Matthew 3;16-17). Here the entire Trinity of God is present. Jesus is being baptized, the Spirit descends upon Him, and the Father announces His pleasure in the Son.

Isaiah announced a second truth from God about the Messiah (that was of course yet future in his day), and provided some details about His ministry. The Messiah would be appointed by the LORD to do the following:

- "To bring good news to the afflicted" (v. 1b). Jesus brought the "Gospel," a word which means "good news." The Gospel was the good news for those who (and are) being afflicted, or poor in

spirit (Matthew 5:3).
- "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted" (v. 1c). Jesus was the spiritual healer. When someone heals an injured person's wounds they "bind them up." Jesus did this to the injured world's heart. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12, we will read this in context during the Gospel lesson).
- "To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners" (v. 1e-ff). The world has been held captive by sin, Jesus came to redeem the world and to free everyone held captive by it.
- "To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD" (v. 2a). The coming of the Messiah Jesus was the most "favorable year of the LORD" since the creation of the universe. Had the people accepted Jesus as their Messiah, Jesus' eternal reign would have begun. Jesus' coming would fulfill an untold number of Old Testament prophecies and open the way to the future renewal of the world through worldwide peace in the Millennial and eternal kingdoms.

Finally, if we move to the closing verses 10-11, we see some additional detail about the future ministries of Jesus as follows:

- The Messiah will give those who trust in Him a reason to rejoice: They will exalt the Name of the Lord in whose righteousness they will be adorned. "I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (v. 10).
- In the future, the world will be a place of universal righteousness and the earth's curse will be reversed. "For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise To spring up before all the nations" (v. 11).

The intermediate verses that were omitted in the Mass reading explain more about Jesus' ministry, but these details are concerning things that will happen after His Second Coming.

- After the Day of the Lord, referred as "the day of vengeance of our God" (v. 2), Jesus will comfort all those who mourn as a result of the terrible series of events that unfolded on the earth (v. 3). Part of what will happen during that time is terrible persecution of believers alive during that time. We see in the Book of Revelation how God comforts those who were martyred for their faith during this Great Tribulation period. "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:9-10).
- The war torn world will be rebuilt after the devastation brought about by the AntiChrist and God's vengeance of his evil rulership of the global commercial empire and false religious empire known as "Mystery Babylon" (v. 4).

- Gentiles will be in-grafted in the kingdom ("strangers," v. 5), as foretold by Paul in Romans 11:11-17. God will use the Jews' rejection of their Messiah during the unforeseen "church age" in order to bring the Gentiles into His eternal kingdom.
- The rightful priesthood will be restored to Israel with their honor restored with a double blessing (vv. 6-7). God said, "For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering; And I will faithfully give them their recompense And make an everlasting covenant with them. Then their offspring will be known among the nations, And their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them will recognize them Because they are the offspring whom the LORD has blessed" (vv. 8-9).

That's a lot to digest. The key point of all of this is that the coming of the Messiah was a crucially important mystery that was fulfilled by the miraculous birth of Jesus that we will celebrate in just two short weeks from the date of these Sunday Mass study notes. We cannot underemphasize the importance of Jesus and as we transition to the second reading let's pause for a moment and ask God to help us to celebrate the upcoming holiday season with Jesus foremost in our minds.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. The context is Paul's teaching on the upcoming calamity we mentioned in the first reading, the "Day of the Lord's judgment" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Someone in Thessalonica had been teaching the false doctrine that the Lord had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Here Paul introduced the concept that the church would be taken up into the air along with church saints who had already died (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). Chapter 5 opens with Paul's teaching on the **real** return of the Lord, for those alive during that generation when God will outpour His wrath upon the unbelieving earth. During that time many will come to faith in the Lord Jesus during perhaps the greatest turning of people's hearts to God since the creation of the world. Paul addressed these future believers and told them that "God had not destined them to wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9) and provided a list of instructions to them (vv. 11-15) including, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people" (v. 15). It is in this context that Paul provided the following instructions that are applicable to believers of all ages, and especially to those undergoing terrible persecution in the last days.

Second Reading:

16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24)

Paul directed the believers to live in a state of unceasing joy and thankfulness (vv. 16-18) while holding to the truths of the Gospel message (v. 20, "do not despise prophetic utterances"). Because of all the false teaching that will happen in that era (and is already happening now, 1 John 2:18), they are to "examine everything very carefully" and only adhere to those things that are actually true (v. 21b, "that which is good"). Finally, Paul pronounced a blessing upon them, wishing that God would find them blameless upon His return, and noted that the written prophecy regarding what would happen in these last days would indeed prove to be true (v. 24). Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians give guidance to us who would also live in light of truth. We do not do these things in order to be saved, we live this way because we are saved. It is God who sanctifies us—literally, sets us apart—so that our lives reflect His value system when we do not quench the Spirit of God who lives inside us. God is faithful.

Paul's message is important to us as we move towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus by the blessed virgin Mary. God calls us as believers to remember the work that He has done through sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. During the Christmas season we are to "set our sights upon Jesus." Although many in the world have set their sights upon Jesus in the manner of directing their weapons of unbelief against Him, Paul said that regardless of the circumstance and even in times of terrible persecution we are to "abstain from **every** form of evil" (v. 22, emphasis added).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson focuses on what John the Baptist did to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. John was a few months older than Jesus. They were cousins, so they very well could have spent time together as they were growing up and beginning to understand their unique place in God's redemptive plan. Today's reading concerns the prophecy about this John the Baptist.

Gospel Reading:

6 There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

19 This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said." 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. 27 It is He who comes after me,

the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

John the Baptist wasn't the Light but came as a forerunner of Jesus, the Light (v. 6-8). John the Baptist's purpose was to testify about Jesus so that people may believe (v. 7b). When the Jewish leaders asked John who he was, they inquired about whether he was Elijah or the prophet spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy. The Jews were aware of these two prophecies, first that Elijah would return (Malachi 4:5) as well as the coming of a great prophet as predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. John answered them clearly by saying that he was neither the Christ (v. 20), Elijah (v. 21), or the prophet of Deuteronomy 18 (v. 22). Instead, he quoted from Isaiah 40, with which they would have been familiar, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD'" (v. 23). Isaiah's description of John the Baptist was very accurate, as he was the one proclaiming Jesus in the wilderness "beyond the Jordan" (v. 28). John told them that the Messiah was among them but they did not know Him (v. 26) and that he was unworthy of even untying His sandal (v. 27).

The reading skipped a large section of text including verses 9 – 18. We are covering these verses because they are not being covered during the Mass during any soon upcoming Sundays.

9 There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" 16 For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. 17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:9-18)

Even though Jesus created the world, many of His own people rejected Him as the promised Messiah (v. 10 – 11). However, this didn't stop the plan of God to grant salvation to all who believe (v. 12). Jesus was the "Word that became flesh" that "dwelt among [the disciples]" (v. 14). He is the one about whom John the Baptist testified, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me'" (v. 15). Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law (v. 17), and was the fleshly manifestation of God, because God the Father exists in the form of a Spirit that cannot be seen by man (v. 18). Jesus is eternal, because He existed before John the Baptist although He was born physically some months after this greatest of men (Matthew 11:11). These are some profound truths that we can ponder as our lives move towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas Day.

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Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we learned about John the Baptist who came as the fulfillment of the prophecy concerning the coming of a forerunner announcing the ministry of Jesus. Later in the Gospel, we learn that John's life was cut short by King Herod in an outright persecution for the content of John's message to repent and as Paul said in the second reading "abstain from every form of evil." Jesus took over where John left off and continued the calling to repent (Matthew 4:17), then His life was also cut short. What difference does knowing that **you** will be persecuted for your faith make in your life as you carry on this same message?

2. How does your understanding of the context of the second reading from Paul's First Letter to Thessalonians help you to place Christian persecution into a different context?

3. Review the list of what the Messiah was appointed for in the Old Testament passage of Isaiah. Pick one of the bullet points that resonates with you and talk to God about how this truth impacts you. Let God know that you want Jesus to be that kind of Messiah for you.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-10-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah in which we see a prophecy about the coming of the forerunner who would announce the Messiah. Then we move to the second reading from Second Peter and close with the Gospel lesson from the first chapter of Mark.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah chapter 40. This section of Isaiah focuses upon the preaching of the Gospel as well as prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). In the first verse, "Jerusalem" refers to the Nation as a whole. *Note: Verses 6-8 that were skipped in the reading were included below.*

First Reading:

1 "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. 2 "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins." 3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Omitted section:

6 A voice says, "Call out." Then he answered, "What shall I call out?" All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, When the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.

9 Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him And His recompense before Him. 11 Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isaiah 40:1-11)

In this passage, some timeless principles emerge for our lives today. A key point is that while humans are finite, God and His Word stand forever. If this is the case, then it is wise for us to study God's Word and to orient our lives around its truth. This passage also shares the two-sided nature of the Messiah's coming: "The Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him" and "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock . . .He will gently lead the nursing ewes" (v. 10-11). We see that God is gentle with those who need and accept His care, but He is also authoritative with those who are not willing to bend to His ways.

Another main theme in the reading is the prophecy of the future redemption of the Nation of Israel through the coming of the Messiah that will be announced by a forerunner. Although God disciplined Israel "double for her sins (v. 2), He began the restoration process first by sending John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah Jesus as predicted in verse 3. Isaiah's message was a picture of the manner in which the Messiah Jesus would be revealed to the world through a spokesperson as a forerunner who sends a clear message:

Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (vv. 3b – 5)

The forerunner, who in retrospect we know was John the Baptist, prepared the way for the coming of the King Jesus. John "cleared the way" by **preaching** the good news (the Gospel) telling the people that they needed to repent of their sins. John was removing the obstacles that lay in people's paths in order to receive the subsequent message from Jesus that He was the only way to God (John 3:3, John 3:16, John 14:6). John was "leveling the mountains and smoothing the ground" so the world could receive Jesus' Gospel. Like many prophetic writings, verse 5 has an "already not yet" sense in that although Jesus did come and His glory was revealed, in some future day He will return and all flesh will see the glory of the Lord.

Isaiah's message was also a picture of the literal, eschatological (end times) restoration of the Nation of Israel. In the last days, God will make Jerusalem the capital city of the universe and remove both the physical and spiritual obstacles standing in the way for people to come to the Lord in Jerusalem. Verse 3 says, "Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." We see something similar to this in Revelation 16:12 where God says that He will make a way for the "kings of the east." Although the interpretation of this passage is difficult, it seems to mean that national leaders from regions to the east of Jerusalem will be converted to the true faith of God in the end times. Like many prophecies in the Bible, a day will come when we will be able to look back and understand the fulfillment of the prophecy in hindsight. Until then the best we can do is to "study to show ourselves approved" (2 Timothy 2:15). We must endeavor to utilize the prophecies to the best of our ability in a way that calls the world to repent of their sin and place their faith in the one and only means of finding an eternal relationship with God, faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Isaiah's message, we see the kindness of God who granted us salvation by His free grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). A caveat is that we must be willing to repent of our sins and turn from our former sinful behavior. This means to turn from, or agree with what God says about the seriousness of our sin.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Second Epistle of Peter. The context is Paul's teaching on the return of the Lord which will occur at the conclusion of the period known in the biblical text as the "Day of the Lord." In this Epistle, Saint Peter described how the people in the future would say that since their daily lives were continuing as had been happening throughout all the previous generations that the Lord wasn't going to return. They would say, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). Paul informed his readers that Jesus would indeed return and reminded them of the flood that God unleashed upon the ungodly world during the days of Noah (2 Peter 3:4-7). What he was saying was that the coming Day of the Lord's judgment would unfold in a similar way as it did during the days of Noah. Our Lord had previously said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37). The reading for today picks up in verse 8.

Second Reading:

8 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 11 Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! 13 But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found

by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2 Peter 3:8-14)

As we said in the introduction to the reading, Peter said that in the future, scoffers would come saying that the Lord was delaying His return (2 Peter 3:4). Peter corrected this false teaching by explaining that God, Who exists in eternity, does not count time the same way people do on earth (v. 8). Since with God "a thousand years is like one day," the return of the Lord will come in an instant in the mind of God, quickly, "like a thief" (v. 10a). The reason that God has delayed isn't because He is not returning, but because He is longsuffering ("patient" v. 9c) and "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (v.9d). This is the message that was preached by John the Baptist, the message that we will hear later in the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark. Peter went on to reveal some as yet untold prophecy about events that would happen in the universe sometime after Jesus returned. He said that the earth would be destroyed (or renewed) by fire (vv. 10b-11), and a new heaven and earth would be created "in which righteousness dwells" (v. 13b). Peter concluded the reading with the crux of the matter. "**Therefore**, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless" (v. 14, emphasis added). He told them that since the Lord **was** going to be returning soon along with terrible events on the earth, and the earth would then undergo a purification process in which all unrighteousness would be removed, they needed to be behaving in a manner befitting of this knowledge. Jesus said, "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into" (Matthew 24:43). The reality of Jesus' soon return should encourage us to live in a manner that is consistent with His character and ways.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move to the Gospel lesson, let's summarize what we have covered so far. We saw in the first reading how God in His grace would send a forerunner whom we know as John the Baptist to prepare the hearts of the people to receive the message of Jesus Christ. In the second reading, we saw that Peter warned the people that scoffers would come in the future saying that the Lord Jesus had delayed His return, and they would go on about their ungodly business as if the Lord was never going to return. Peter corrected this false theology and said the Lord was going to return and that we we should not mark time the way that it is done on earth, for God exists outside of time and with Him "a thousand years is as a day." No, Peter said, the Lord would return in an instant "as a thief in the night." Since He was coming quickly people needed to act in godly ways befitting of the imminent return of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16).

The Gospel reading is from the opening section of the Gospel of Saint Mark. Mark, known as John Mark (Acts 12:25) had a bit of a checkered past because he was the man that deserted Paul and Barnabas during Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). During Paul's second missionary journey Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, but this caused a strong disagreement with Paul (Acts 15:38-40). In spite of these events, John Mark went on to prove himself to be an extremely valuable co-worker in the Lord, and was even vindicated by Paul (Colossians 4:10). Mark was

evidently a close disciple of Saint Peter because the latter described him as his son (1 Peter 5:13). Mark's Gospel was written for Roman believers, primarily Gentiles because of some nuances he used in translating certain words from the Aramaic and his use of Latin instead of Greek in some places. The main theme of Mark is the presentation of Jesus as the suffering servant of God as portrayed in Isaiah 53. He emphasized Jesus' humanity much more than the other Gospel writers including his emotions (for example Mark 8:12) and human limitations (for example Mark 11:12). Mark, unlike the other Gospel writers such as Luke, did not include lengthy genealogies of Jesus likely because these are not as significant to his intended Gentile audience.

Gospel Reading:

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; 3 THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" 4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. 7 And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:1-8)

Mark, obviously very familiar with Isaiah, quoted from his Book in the very first verse of his Gospel. The coming of John the Baptist marks the fulfillment of verse 3 from Isaiah 40 that we studied in the first reading. John was described as a most unusual man "clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist" (v. 6). The key point of this verse is now that John the Baptist had come, he would point the way for the coming of Jesus Christ (v. 7). John the Baptist said, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I" (v. 7a), then humbly said, "and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals" (v. 7b). John the Baptist then foretold how Jesus would not only baptize with water, such as he was doing, but would send God's Holy Spirit (v. 8). John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, having been born to Elizabeth (Luke 1:34-37, Jesus' disciple John, the one whom Jesus loved, was also Jesus' cousin). Note that John's diet was indicative of his reliance upon God, the same way that Elijah relied upon God when he fed him by the ravens as told in 1 Kings 17:6. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy about the coming of a "forerunner" that was saw in the first reading. His coming was also the fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the return of the Prophet Elijah given in the Book of Malachi. God said in that Book, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6). The future fulfillment will be when Jesus returns with His church at the end of the age as we studied last week.

What does all of this mean for us as we live out our lives as Christians? First, like John, we also are

called to "prepare the way of the Lord" by preaching the Good News to the world that if they repent of their sin and place their faith in Jesus Christ they will have eternal forgiveness in eternity with God. God is "patient and not willing that any should perish" to the extent that He uses unusual people like John the Baptist and even more unusual people like you and me to do His work! Finally, since the return of the Lord Jesus is imminent we need to accelerate our proclamation of this message, as well as live in a way befitting of His soon return.

Reflection Questions

1. The Gospel reading said that "all of the country of Judea was going to [John the Baptist] . . . and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). What do you think motivated the people to confess their sins to him? As a clue, what word is repeated in verses 4 and 7?

2. As we look towards Christmas coming up in just two and half weeks, pray and ask God if there is anything standing in the way between you and the relationship with Him that He desires with you.

Dear God, is there anything that you would have me to do during this Christmas season? What mountains needs to be made flat, and hills need to be leveled in order for me to accomplish your will this Christmas season?

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