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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 7: 12/14/2025



Did you know that even as firm believers in Jesus Christ, it's natural to have doubts about our faith? There may be days when we feel like we can walk on water, but other days we feel like we are slipping into a deep, dark sea. Throughout history, even some of the most famous Christians have experienced moments of doubt regarding their faith. We will see in the Gospel lesson today that one of those people who experienced doubts was none other than John the Baptist. In the first reading from the Old Testament, we will also see that the people of Israel were struggling to believe in the promises of God. Isaiah was sent as a messenger to encourage God's people to keep their covenant (or relationship) with God. The passage we looked at last week sets the stage for the good news that God has not abandoned His people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading today is from Isaiah Chapter 35. Before we read the text, it's essential to take note of the context, the audience to whom Isaiah was speaking, and the information we can glean from

other prophetic voices in the Bible. This prophet ministered to the people of the Southern Tribes of Israel, including Benjamin and Judah, during the time that Assyria took the Northern Kingdom into captivity. Micah and Hosea were prophets speaking on behalf of God at the same time as Isaiah. His message was one of repentance and subsequent hope for the future. Isaiah was a forerunner who announced the coming Messiah and his future kingdom, much like John the Baptist in the New Testament. Like the other prophets, Isaiah often saw near and long-term events "telescoped" together, but even more so because of the greater range of his visions. This is called by the theological term "prophetic foreshortening." In hindsight, it's easy to differentiate between the near-term events and those in the distant future that have yet to be fulfilled. However, when we look at the events that haven't been fulfilled yet, such as the future era known by biblical scholars as the Millennial Kingdom, it's more challenging to determine the order and timing of the events. This portion of Chapter 35 concerns the coming Kingdom which the Messiah would bring in. Looking back, we understand this would be fulfilled at Jesus' Second Coming. But Isaiah did not have the advantage of knowing the difference between what would happen when Jesus came the first time and what is yet to take place at His second coming. This is why it's essential to understand the whole of Scripture when we read isolated portions of the prophetic Books.

As you study the first reading, pay attention to Isaiah's proclamation of the future hope for Israel and the whole world of believers, in the context of the coming Millennial Kingdom.

First Reading:

> *1 The wilderness and the desert will be glad, And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus 2 It will blossom profusely And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, The majesty of our God. 3 Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. 4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah. 7 And the scorched land will become a pool, And the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, Grass becomes reeds and rushes. 8 And a highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, But it will be for him who walks that way, And fools will not wander on it. 9 No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, 10 And the ransomed of the LORD will return, And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:1-10)*

One of the things that Isaiah looks forward to in the Millennial Kingdom reign of Jesus is that the broken parts of this earth will be restored; that includes nature and people. If we pause to assess our world, every part of it seems broken at some level. Families are torn apart, lives are exhausted, and fear and anxiety seem to be rampant. Although Isaiah prophesied long ago, his words are very relevant today. Isaiah's prophecy is meant to remind God's people that one day all will be well—He will set the record straight. He will save us. Those who trust in God to save them are called the "redeemed" and the "ransomed" of the LORD. To be redeemed is to be repurchased or restored to one's original intent. To be ransomed is to be set free from being in the grip of an enemy with a payment. Both of these descriptions can be treasured terms of endearment for those who walk on the "Highway of Holiness" by trusting in Christ's holiness to save them.

As a Christian, it's essential to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got in the way of the Jews correctly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century Jews had a good grasp on the Scriptures, so many of them wouldn't have missed the First Coming of Jesus. The Jews had endured centuries of persecution from the various world powers, including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. From all appearances the Prophet Micah made it very clear what would happen, even if this forerunner didn't explain the exact timing of the events. Micah said, "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). Micah named the exact town in which the Messiah would be born. Though there were two towns named Bethlehem, he differentiated between the one in the North and the other near Jerusalem, where the new King would be born. Like the other prophets, Micah also telescoped near and far-term events today when he saw the kingdom of Jesus.

> *1 And it will come about in the last days That the mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, And the peoples will stream to it. 2 And many nations will come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD And to the house of the God of Jacob, That He may teach us about His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For from Zion will go forth the law, Even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 3 And He will judge between many peoples And render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they train for war. (Micah 4:1-3)*

Micah said that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a time of peace, when weapons of war would be turned into peaceful use (v.3). In this age the city of Jerusalem would be the capital city of the universe (v.1). The King would serve as the perfect judge over the entire world (v.3). The Jews misinterpreted this to mean that the Messiah would immediately usher in His Kingdom when he came, and who can blame them? Only after Jesus was crucified, raised from the dead, and explained the Scriptures (Luke 24:27) to them did some of them understand. Even then, some doubted (Matthew 28:17).

Malachi was another prophet who called the people of God to be patient. He provided precise details about the events concerning the coming of the Messiah. In fact, Malachi announced that a forerunner, who we know as John the Baptist, would precede Jesus. He said, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). This New Testament Prophet would come in the spirit of the Prophet Elijah (John 19:21), and that Elijah would return during the coming tribulation period. Malachi said, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Exercising patience is very important, especially when we expect God to come rushing in and fix the events in the fallen world. This is even more important when, like the Jews, we experience injustice at the hands of our civil rulers. In the second reading today from Saint James, we see this critical leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:13) cautioning the young Church about the need to be patient concerning the return of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

> *7 Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. 8 You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. 10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (James 5:7-10)*

James reminded us that the Prophets were an example of those who were patient and persisted through suffering and quoted from them as scriptural authority. He admonished us not to complain against one another, because living in the spirit of "unthankfulness" would bring about judgment (v.8). This hearkens back to Jesus' words: "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). James exercised authority over the believers gathered during the Jerusalem council (refer to Acts 15) and exhibited great patience towards those with whom he disagreed. One of the ways he did this was by claiming the authority of the prophets. James said, "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written" (Acts 15:15), and then he quoted from the prophets. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, James was supremely wise because he rested his authority on the weight of the supremacy of Scripture by relying upon the writings of the Prophets.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move on to the Gospel lesson about a New Testament Prophet, I wish to have you ponder this question. Some time ago, someone asked me who I thought was the greatest man who ever lived. I responded with a question. "Do you mean the greatest man ever 'lived' in the past tense?" "Yes, in the past tense," they said. My answer was easy. I said, "John the Baptist, and the greatest Man that ever 'lives' is Jesus." Who do you think was the greatest man who ever lived? Study the text from the Gospel lesson, and as you read, try to ascertain why the greatest man who ever lived would ask Jesus the question that he did.

Gospel Reading:

> *2 Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" 4 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6 And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." 7 And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces. 9 But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes,*

> *I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:2-11)*

Why would John the Baptist, the greatest man that ever lived (v.11), send someone to ask Jesus whether he was the Messiah? Well, if you were in prison for speaking the truth and you expected the Messiah to deliver you, you might have trouble discerning whether Jesus was the promised one, just like John the Baptist. The question for all of us is whether we want the real Messiah or whether we want our own version of the Messiah (someone who doesn't leave us in prison). Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Even though John was the greatest man that ever *lived (in the physical sense, although his spirit lives forever), John the Baptist was a fallible, imperfect man. However, Jesus commended him for his faithfulness in fulfilling the role of the forerunner or messenger. In response to John the Baptist's question about whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus said, in so many words, YES! Since He was in the process of fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies (the blind see . . . the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life), He was reassuring John that his faith was well placed in Jesus being the Messiah of God. As we saw before, Malachi said, "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1b). Jesus clearly fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah, including Malachi, and quoted it as proof of His divinity. (Matthew 11:10).

*Jesus is the most perfect Man who ever *lives*.

John the Baptist's shortcomings give Christians hope, especially during the upcoming Christmas, which is such a difficult time for many people. Since even the second-greatest man who ever lived experienced periods of doubt, we too shouldn't be surprised when it happens to us. Saint Peter said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

Reflection Questions

1. What about you? Have you come to the place where you are doubting your faith? Read the advice from Jesus, the Greatest Man that Ever **Lives,** and see what He has to say about coming to a place where you either confirm your faith in Him or find faith in Him for the first time.

> *16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:16-21)*

Saint Paul explained, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Romans 10:9-10).

How do these Scriptures give you hope, especially during Christmas?

2. When you think of the terms "redeemed" and "ransomed" in regard to your relationship to God through Christ, how does this give you hope and patience for God to "work all things together for good" as He continues to conform you to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28-29)?

Perhaps you would be willing to leave a comment on our web page or Facebook.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-15-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Zephaniah, one of the so-called "Minor Prophets," largely because their 12 prophecies are shorter than the Major Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then we move to one of the Epistles of St. Paul, Philippians, a letter likely written from a prison cell in Rome, making its theme of joy even more significant. Finally, we conclude with a reading from Luke's Gospel, which includes some interesting instructions for the people of Jesus' day.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Zephaniah has been called "the Royal Prophet," probably because he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah. He was the last of the prophets before the captivity of Judah and ministered during the reign of Josiah, who tried to restore proper worship practices which had been pretty much abandoned in Judah. His message centers on "the Day of the LORD," which is seen from two perspectives: 1) a time of judgment against sinners, and 2) a time of blessing for those who follow God.

First Reading:

Zephaniah 3:14-18 NAS95 14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You will fear disaster no more. 16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not be afraid, O Zion; Do not let your hands fall limp. 17 "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. 18 "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts–They came from you, O Zion; The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

The first two-thirds of the prophecy deal with God's judgment of sin and apostasy. Someone has said that the book is an out-working of the text, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). God's people must worship Him and Him alone. Otherwise, judgment will come, and in this case it is to be the captivity of the nation by Babylonia, which did occur in 732 BC and 586 BC.

Today's reading, however, is in a concluding portion of the book that looks forward—beyond the captivity—to a time, yet future, when Israel will rejoice in the promised Kingdom blessing, chapter 3:9-20). Such a blessed future will be an occasion to "shout for joy… shout in triumph… rejoice and exult." Why? Because God has "taken away His judgments against you" and "He has cleared away your enemies." What causes for joy and rejoicing? But, even more astounding, the promise is that God Himself will be among them. The phrase is repeated: "The LORD is in your midst" (vv. 15, 17).

As in other Old Testament prophecies, Zephaniah warns his people that judgment is certain; it will come on the Day of the Lord's wrath. But he admonishes them in chapter 2:1-3 to "Seek the Lord … seek righteousness; seek humility." There will be a restoration, as we see in chapter 3; a remnant will be saved.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Zephaniah had promised a time of future joy and rejoicing after severe judgment and captivity. In this epistle, Paul encourages Christians to find their joy and peace in God in the midst of trials and

difficult circumstances. He himself had suffered to even get to Philippi some years before (see Acts 16), and he understands how stressful life can be. But, as in Zephaniah, it's the promised presence of God that enables the Christian to live above life's stresses and rejoice in God's goodness.

Second Reading:

Philippians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Chapter four of this power-packed letter emphasizes the power that Jesus provides for the Christian's life. There is strength in unity, vv. 1-3; strength of God's peace, vv. 4-7; strength of God's presence, vv. 8-9; and strength of God's provision, vv. 10-19. We look today at the significant words from verses 4-7.

Paul instructs the Philippians with emphasis, "rejoice." That joy is possible, of course, only because it is "in the Lord." Outside of one's personal trust in the all-sufficient grace and the mercy of God, there is no lasting source of joy. He encourages the believer to be gentle. Though translated a variety of ways ("forbearing," "moderation"), its meaning in the original language if "sweet reasonableness." Wouldn't life be so much more pleasant if we lived in a continue environment of sweet reasonableness? How is that possible? Well, believers in Jesus must be constantly aware that "The Lord is near." Not merely that He is watching judgmentally, but that He is near to help, to keep us sweet and reasonable. The indwelling Christ does that for us when we cannot by ourselves.

The next admonition is so difficult for many of us. He writes, "Be anxious for nothing." Didn't Paul realize the many anxieties those first-century Christians were facing? How could it tell them not to worry? He is likely saying that Christians should not be distracted by the affairs of life that they forget the real source of life, peace, and joy. It's good to remember that he was living in circumstances that may have been far more difficult than the Philippians at that time. But, more importantly, he provides the antidote for anxiety: prayer and thanksgiving. Nothing in life is beyond the realm of prayer. We may and should take everything to God in prayer; He should be our first resort, not the last. We should approach God with confidence that He is both able and willing to relieve our fears.

The result is the incomprehensible peace that only God can provide. Peace is not just the absence of fear or stress. It is, as the Hebrews say, "Shalom." The term implies wholeness, harmony, completeness. Those attributes can be found only in the God of Peace. Here are Paul's words from another of his epistles: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels all cover the life and ministry of Jesus, each from a different perspective with somewhat different purposes in mind. Luke's telling emphasizes Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. His audience probably consisted mostly of Gentile Christians, but he wrote to show his readers that the Gospel is for both Jews and Gentles.

Luke's account is more chronological than the other Gospels. Today's reading is taken from Christ's teaching as He approaches Jerusalem for the climactic final days of his earthly life. In this passage, which could be titled "The Signs of the Times," He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (the title He frequently uses to speak of Himself).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 3:10-18 NAS95 10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

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Today's reading reports on the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. John's words just prior to this reading were rather scathing. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He had been prophesied that that the Lord would come to straighten the crooked places and make level the rough ways. "All flesh," he said,"shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6).

It is in response to that teaching that the crowd asked, "Then what shall we do?" John the Baptist lists a number of practices that his listeners could pursue that would demonstrate a genuine change of heart that he has been calling for. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1). A man with two coats could show his heart change by giving one to someone who had not. Likewise, with someone who has enough food; he can share.

When the tax collectors (usually men who collected more than the tax due to enlarge their own pockets) indicated they wanted to enter the waters of baptism for repentance, John tells them to collect only what is the proper tax. Soldiers also asked about their responsibility, and John pointed out what, apparently, were the illegal practices of some: taking money by force, falsely accusing people, complaining about their wages. They are to discontinue such practices.

All of this had the people conjecturing about who this prophet really was. Could he be the Messiah? John responds to clarify his role by noting his inferiority to the One he is preparing the way for. John's baptism was with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (was was to be fulfilled in Acts 2). It's interesting to note the final words of this reading, "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Yet, the preceding words are words of judgment ("winnowing fork," "burn up the chaff"). You see, the gospel has two facets. It offers the free grace of God in response to faith in the work of Jesus, but it promised judgment to those who reject Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. In light of the second reading, list the ways in which you daily lay down your anxieties to God. Do I have the unexplainable joy and peace of God because I pray with thanksgiving and give my anxieties to Him?

2. In the Gospel reading the crowd asked John, "Then what shall we do?" To which John responded

with a list of practices believers in God exhibited as evidence of their change of heart. List two ways in which your life provides this evidence of turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to living out your life for God.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-17-2023



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 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 eyewitnesses 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 concerned with 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 because 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 engrafted 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 under emphasize 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 the 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.

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. 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 in 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 resonate 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.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-11-2022



Did you know that even as firm believers in Jesus Christ that it's natural to have doubts about our faith? There may be days when we feel like we can walk on water, but other days we feel like we are slipping down into a deep, dark, sea. Throughout history, even some of the most famous Christians have experienced moments of doubt regarding their faith. We will see in the Gospel lesson today that one of those people who experienced doubts was none other than John the Baptist. In the first reading from the Old Testament, we will also see that the people of Israel were struggling to believe in the promises of God. Isaiah was sent as a messenger to encourage God's people to keep their covenant (or relationship) with God. The passage we looked at last week sets the stage for the unfolding good news that God has not abandoned His people.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading today is from Isaiah Chapter 35. Before we read the text, it's important to take note of the context, the audience to whom Isaiah was speaking, and information that we can glean from other prophetic voices in the Bible. This prophet ministered to the people of the Southern Tribes of Israel, including Benjamin and Judah during the time that the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity by Assyria. Micah and Hosea were prophets speaking on behalf of God at the same time as Isaiah. His message was one of repentance and subsequent hope for the future. Isaiah was a forerunner, one that announced the coming Messiah and his future kingdom, much like John the Baptist in the New Testament. Like the other prophets, Isaiah often saw near and far term events "telescoped" together, but even more so because of the greater range of his visions. This is called by the theological term "prophetic foreshortening." When we look back in hindsight, it's easy for us to differentiate between the near-term events and those in the distant future that have yet to be fulfilled. However, when we look at the events which haven't been fulfilled yet, such as the future era known by biblical scholars as the Millennial Kingdom, it's more difficult to determine the order and timing of the events. This portion of Chapter 35 concerns the coming Kingdom which would be brought in by the Messiah. Looking back we understand that this would be fulfilled at Jesus' Second Coming. But Isaiah did not have the advantage of knowing the difference between what would happen when Jesus came the first time and what is yet to take place in His second coming. This is why it's important to understand the whole of Scripture when we read isolated portions of the prophetic Books.

As you study the first reading, pay attention to Isaiah's proclamation of the future hope of Israel and the whole world of believers, in the context of the future Millennial Kingdom.

First Reading:

1 The wilderness and the desert will be glad, And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus 2 It will blossom profusely And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, The majesty of our God. 3 Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. 4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah. 7 And the scorched land will become a pool, And the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals,

its resting place, Grass becomes reeds and rushes. 8 And a highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, But it will be for him who walks that way, And fools will not wander on it. 9 No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, 10 And the ransomed of the LORD will return, And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:1-10)

One of the things that Isaiah looks forward to in the Millennial Kingdom reign of Jesus is that the broken parts of this earth will be restored; that includes nature and people. If we pause to assess our world, it seems that every part of it is broken at some level. Families are torn apart, lives are exhausted, fear and anxiety seem to be rampant. Although Isaiah prophesied long ago, his words are very relevant today. Isaiah's prophecy is meant to remind God's people that one day all will be well—He will set the record straight. He will save us. Those who trust in God to save them are those who are called the "redeemed" and the "ransomed" of the LORD. To be redeemed is to be bought back or restored to one's original intent. To be ransomed is to be set free from being in the grip of an enemy with a payment. Both descriptions can be treasured terms of endearment for those who walk on the "Highway of Holiness" by trusting in Christ's holiness to save them.

As a Christian, it's important to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices going on around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got into the way of the Jews properly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century Jews had a good grasp on the Scriptures so many of them wouldn't have missed the First Coming of Jesus. The Jews had endured centuries of persecution from the various world powers, including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. From all appearances the Prophet Micah made it very clear what would happen, even if this forerunner didn't explain the exact timing of the events. Micah said, "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). Micah named the exact town in which the Messiah would be born. Though there were two towns named Bethlehem, he differentiated between the one in the North and the one near Jerusalem in which the new King would be born. Like the other prophets, Micah also telescoped near and far term events today when he saw the kingdom of Jesus.

1 And it will come about in the last days That the mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, And the peoples will stream to it. 2 And many nations will come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD And to the house of the God of Jacob, That He may teach us about His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For from Zion will go forth the law, Even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 3 And He will judge between many peoples And render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then

they will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they train for war. (Micah 4:1-3)

Micah said that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a time of peace, when weapons of war would be turned into peaceful usable (v. 3). In this age the city of Jerusalem would be the capital city of the universe (v. 1) and the King would serve as the perfect judge over the entire world (v. 3). The Jews misinterpreted this to mean that the Messiah would immediately usher in His Kingdom when he came, and who can blame them? It was only after Jesus was crucified, raised from the dead, and explained the Scriptures (Luke 24:27) to them that **some of them** understood. Even then, some doubted (Matthew 28:17).

Malachi was another prophet who called the people of God to be patient. He provided clear details about the events concerning the coming of the Messiah. In fact, Malachi announced that a forerunner, who we know as John the Baptist, would precede Jesus. He said, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). This New Testament Prophet would come in the spirit of the Prophet Elijah (John 19:21), and that Elijah would return during the coming tribulation period. Malachi said, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Exercising patience is very important, especially when we expect God to come rushing in and fix the events in the fallen world. This is even more important when, like the Jews, we experience injustice at the hands of our civil rulers. In the second reading today from Saint James, we see this important leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:13) cautioning the young Church about the need to be patient concerning the return of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

7 Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. 8 You too be

patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. 10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (James 5:7-10)

James reminded us that the Prophets were an example of those who were patient and persisted through suffering and quoted from them as scriptural authority. He admonished us not to complain against one another, because living in the spirit of "unthankfulness" would bring about judgment (v.8). This hearkens back to Jesus' words: "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). James exercised authority over the believers gathered during the Jerusalem council (refer to Acts 15) and exhibited great patience towards those with whom he disagreed. One of the ways in which he did this is to claim the authority of the prophets. James said, "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written" (Acts 15:15), and then he went on to quote from the prophets. James, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was supremely wise because he rested his authority on the weight of the supremacy of Scripture by relying upon the writings of the Prophets.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson about a New Testament Prophet, I wish to have you ponder this question. Some time ago, someone asked me who I thought was the greatest man that ever lived. I responded with a question. "Do you mean the greatest man that ever 'lived' in the past tense?" "Yes in the past tense," they said. My answer was easy. I said, "John the Baptist, and the greatest Man that ever 'lives' is Jesus." Who do you think was the greatest man that ever *lived*? Study the text of the Gospel lesson and as you read, try to ascertain why the greatest man that ever lived would ask Jesus the question that he did.

Gospel Reading:

2 Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" 4 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6 And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." 7 And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, "What did you go out

into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces. 9 But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:2-11)

Why would John the Baptist, the greatest man that ever lived (v. 11), send someone to ask Jesus whether he was the Messiah? Well, if you were in prison for speaking the truth and you expected the Messiah to deliver you, you might have trouble discerning whether Jesus was the promised one just like John the Baptist. The question for all of us is whether we want the real Messiah or whether we want our own version of the Messiah (someone who doesn't leave us in prison). Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Even though John was the greatest man that ever **lived* (in the physical sense, although his spirit lives forever), John the Baptist was a fallible, imperfect man. However, he was commended by Jesus for his faithfulness in fulfilling the role of the forerunner or messenger. In response to John the Baptist's question about whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus said, in so many words, YES! Since He was in the process of fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies (the blind see . . . the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life), He was reassuring John that his faith was well placed in Jesus being the Messiah of God. As we saw before, Malachi said, "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1b). Jesus clearly fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah, including Malachi, and quoted it as proof of His divinity. (Matthew 11:10).

*Jesus is the most perfect Man that ever *lives*.

John the Baptist's shortcomings stand to give Christians hope, especially during the upcoming Christmas season, which is such a difficult time for so many people. Since even the second greatest man that ever lived experienced periods of doubt in his life, we too shouldn't be surprised when it happens to us. Saint Peter said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

Reflection Questions

1. What about you, have you come to the place where you are doubting your faith? Read the advice from Jesus, the Greatest Man that Ever **Lives,** and see what He has to say about coming to a place where you either confirm your faith in Him or find faith in Him for the first time.

16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:16-21)

Saint Paul explained, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Romans 10:9-10).

How do these Scriptures provide you with hope, especially during the Christmas season?

2. When you think of the terms "redeemed" and "ransomed" in regards to your relationship to God through Christ, how does this give you hope and patience for God to "work all things together for good" as He continues to conform you to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28-29)?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-12-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Zephaniah, one of the so-called "Minor Prophets," largely because their 12 prophecies are shorter than the Major Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then we move to one of the Epistles of St. Paul, Philippians, a letter likely written from a prison cell in Rome, making its theme of joy even more significant. Finally, we conclude with a reading from Luke's Gospel, which includes some interesting instructions for the people of Jesus' day.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Zephaniah has been called "the Royal Prophet," probably because he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah. He was the last of the prophets before the captivity of Judah and ministered during the reign of Josiah, who tried to restore proper worship practices which had been pretty much abandoned in Judah. His message centers on "the Day of the LORD," which is seen from two perspectives: 1) a time of judgment against sinners, and 2) a time of blessing for those who follow God.

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First Reading:

Zephaniah 3:14-18 NAS95 14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You will fear disaster no more. 16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not be afraid, O Zion; Do not let your hands fall limp. 17 "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. 18 "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts–They came from you, O Zion; The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

The first two-thirds of the prophecy deal with God's judgment of sin and apostasy. Someone has said that the book is an out-working of the text, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). God's people must worship Him and Him alone. Otherwise, judgment will come, and in this case it is to be the captivity of the nation by Babylonia, which did occur in 732 BC and 586 BC.

Today's reading, however, is in a concluding portion of the book that looks forward—beyond the captivity—to a time, yet future, when Israel will rejoice in the promised Kingdom blessing, chapter 3:9-20). Such a blessed future will be an occasion to "shout for joy… shout in triumph… rejoice and exult." Why? Because God has "taken away His judgments against you" and "He has cleared away your enemies." What causes for joy and rejoicing? But, even more astounding, the promise is that God Himself will be among them. The phrase is repeated: "The LORD is in your midst" (vv. 15, 17).

As in other Old Testament prophecies, Zephaniah warns his people that judgment is certain; it will come on the Day of the Lord's wrath. But he admonishes them in chapter 2:1-3 to "Seek the Lord … seek righteousness; seek humility." There will be a restoration, as we see in chapter 3; a remnant will be saved.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Zephaniah had promised a time of future joy and rejoicing after severe judgment and captivity. In this epistle, Paul encourages Christians to find their joy and peace in God in the midst of trials and

difficult circumstances. He himself had suffered to even get to Philippi some years before (see Acts 16), and he understands how stressful life can be. But, as in Zephaniah, it's the promised presence of God that enables the Christian to live above life's stresses and rejoice in God's goodness.

Second Reading:

Philippians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Chapter four of this power-packed letter emphasizes the power that Jesus provides for the Christian's life. There is strength in unity, vv. 1-3; strength from God's peace, vv. 4-7; strength from God's presence, vv. 8-9; and strength from God's provision, vv. 10-19. We look today at the significant words from verses 4-7.

Paul instructs the Philippians with emphasis, "rejoice." That joy is possible, of course, only because it is "in the Lord." Outside of one's personal trust in the all-sufficient grace and mercy of God, there is no lasting source of joy. He encourages the believer to be gentle. Though translated a variety of ways ("forbearing," "moderation"), its meaning in the original language if "sweet reasonableness." Wouldn't life be so much more pleasant if we lived in a continue environment of sweet reasonableness? How is that possible? Well, believers in Jesus must be constantly aware that "The Lord is near." Not merely that He is watching judgmentally, but that He is near to help, to keep us sweet and reasonable. The indwelling Christ does that for us when we cannot by ourselves.

The next admonition is so difficult for many of us. He writes, "Be anxious for nothing." Didn't Paul realize the many anxieties those first-century Christians were facing? How could it tell them not to worry? He is likely saying that Christians should not be distracted by the affairs of life that they forget the real source of life, peace, and joy. It's good to remember that he was living in circumstances that may have been far more difficult than the Philippians at that time. But, more importantly, he provides the antidote for anxiety: prayer and thanksgiving. Nothing in life is beyond the realm of prayer. We may and should take everything to God in prayer; He should be our first resort, not the last. We should approach God with confidence that He is both able and willing to relieve our fears.

The result is the incomprehensible peace that only God can provide. Peace is not just the absence of fear or stress. It is, as the Hebrews say, "Shalom." The term implies wholeness, harmony, completeness. Those attributes can be found only in the God of Peace. Here are Paul's words from another of his epistles: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels all cover the life and ministry of Jesus, each from a different perspective with somewhat different purposes in mind. Luke's telling emphasizes Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. His audience probably consisted mostly of Gentile Christians, but he wrote to show his readers that the Gospel is for both Jews and Gentles.

Luke's account is more chronological than the other Gospels. Today's reading is taken from Christ's teaching as He approaches Jerusalem for the climactic final days of his earthly life. In this passage, which could be titled "The Signs of the Times," He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (the title He frequently uses to speak of Himself).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 3:10-18 NAS95 10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

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Today's reading reports on the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. John's words just prior to this reading were rather scathing. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He had been prophesied that that the Lord would come to straighten the crooked places and make level the rough ways. "All flesh," he said," shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6).

It is in response to that teaching that the crowd asked, "Then what shall we do?" John the Baptist lists a number of practices that his listeners could pursue that would demonstrate a genuine change of heart that he has been calling for. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1). A man with two coats could show his heart change by giving one to someone who had not. Likewise, with someone who has enough food; he can share.

When the tax collectors (usually men who collected more than the tax due to enlarge their own pockets) indicated they wanted to enter the waters of baptism for repentance, John tells them to collect only what is the proper tax. Soldiers also asked about their responsibility, and John pointed out what, apparently, were the illegal practices of some: taking money by force, falsely accusing people, complaining about their wages. They are to discontinue such practices.

All of this had the people conjecturing about who this prophet really was. Could he be the Messiah? John responds to clarify his role by noting his inferiority to the One he is preparing the way for. John's baptism was with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (was was to be fulfilled in Acts 2). It's interesting to note the final words of this reading, "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Yet, the preceding words are words of judgment ("winnowing fork," "burn up the chaff"). You see the gospel has two facets. It offers the free grace of God in response to faith in the work of Jesus, but it promised judgment to those who reject Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. In light of the second reading, list the ways in which you daily lay down your anxieties to God. Do I have the unexplainable joy and peace of God because I pray with thanksgiving and give my anxieties to Him?

2. In the Gospel reading the crowd asked John, "Then what shall we do?" To which John responded

with a list of practices believers in God exhibited as evidence of their change of heart. List two ways in which your life provides this evidence of turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to living out your life for God.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-13-2020



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)

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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.

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, 12-16-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Zephaniah, one of the so-called "Minor Prophets," largely because their 12 prophecies are shorter than the Major Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then we move to one of the Epistles of St. Paul, Philippians, a letter likely written from a prison cell in Rome, making its theme of joy even more significant. Finally, we conclude with a reading from Luke's Gospel, which includes some interesting instructions for the people of Jesus' day.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Zephaniah has been called "the Royal Prophet," probably because he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah. He was the last of the prophets before the captivity of Judah and ministered during the reign of Josiah who tried to restore proper worship practices which had been pretty much abandoned in Judah. His message centers on "the Day of the LORD," which is seen from two perspectives: 1) a time of judgment against sinners, and 2) a time of blessing for those who follow God.

First Reading:

> *Zephaniah 3:14-18 NAS95 14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is*

> *in your midst; You will fear disaster no more. 16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not be afraid, O Zion; Do not let your hands fall limp. 17 "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. 18 "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts–They came from you, O Zion; The reproach of exile is a burden on them.*

The first two-thirds of the prophecy deal with God's judgment of sin and apostasy. Someone has said that the book is an out-working of the text, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). God's people must worship Him and Him alone. Otherwise, judgment will come, and in this case it is to be the captivity of the nation by Babylonia, which did occur in —.

Today's reading, however, is in a concluding portion of the book that looks forward—beyond the captivity—to a time, yet future, when Israel will rejoice in the promised Kingdom blessing, chapter 3:9-20). Such a blessed future will be occasion to "shout for joy … shout in triumph … rejoice and exult." Why? Because God has "taken away His judgments against you" and "He has cleared away your enemies." What causes for joy and rejoicing? But, even more astounding, the promise is that God Himself will be among them. The phrase is repeated: "The LORD is in your midst" (vv. 15, 17).

As in other Old Testament prophecies, Zephaniah warns his people that judgment is certain; it will come at the Day of the Lord's wrath. But he admonishes them in chapter 2:1-3 to "Seek the Lord … seek righteousness; seek humility." There will be a restoration, as we see in chapter 3; a remnant will be saved.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Zephaniah had promised a time of future joy and rejoicing after severe judgment and captivity. In this epistle, Paul encourages Christians to find their joy and peace in God in the midst of trials and difficult circumstances. He himself had suffered to even get to Philippi some years before (see Acts 16), and he understands how stressful life can be. But, as in Zephaniah, it's the promised presence of God that enables the Christian to live above life's stresses and rejoice in God's goodness.

Second Reading:

> *Philippians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Chapter four of this power-packed letter emphasizes the power that Jesus provides for the Christian's life. There is strength in unity, vv. 1-3; strength from God's peace, vv. 4-7; strength from God's presence, vv. 8-9; and strength from God's provision, vv. 10-19. We look today at the significant words from verses 4-7.

Paul instructs the Philippians with emphasis, "rejoice." That joy is possible, of course, only because it is "in the Lord." Outside of one's personal trust in the all-sufficient grace and mercy of God, there is no lasting source of joy. He encourages the believer to be gentle. Though translated a variety of ways ("forbearing," "moderation"), its meaning in the original language if "sweet reasonableness." Wouldn't life be so much more pleasant if we lived in a continue environment of sweet reasonableness? How is that possible? Well, believers in Jesus must be constantly aware that "The Lord is near." Not merely that He is watching judgmentally but that He is near to help, to keep us sweet and reasonable. The indwelling Christ does that for us when we cannot by ourselves.

The next admonition is so difficult for many of us. He writes, "Be anxious for nothing." Didn't Paul realize the many anxieties those first-century Christians were facing? How could it tell them not to worry? He is likely saying that Christians should not be distracted by the affairs of life that they forget the real source of life, peace, and joy. It's good to remember that he was living in circumstances that may have been far more difficult than the Philippians at that time. But, more importantly, he provides the antidote for anxiety: prayer and thanksgiving. Nothing in life is beyond the realm of prayer. We may and should take everything to God in prayer; He should be our first resort, not the last. We should approach God with confidence that He is both able and willing to relieve our fears.

The result is the incomprehensible peace that only God can provide. Peace is not just the absence of fear or stress. It is, as the Hebrews say, "Shalom." The term implies wholeness, harmony, completeness. Those attributes can be found only in the God of Peace. Here are Paul's words from another of his epistles: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels all cover the life and ministry of Jesus, each from a different perspective with somewhat different purposes in mind—all, however, to reveal the purposes of His coming to the glory of God. Luke's telling emphasizes Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. His audience probably consisted mostly of Gentile Christians, but he wrote to show his readers that the Gospel is for both Jews and Gentles.

Luke's account is more chronological than the other Gospels. Today's reading is taken from Christ's teaching as He approaches Jerusalem for the climactic final days of his earthly life. In this passage, which could be titled "The Signs of the Times," He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (the title He frequently uses to speak of Himself).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 3:10-18 NAS95 10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.*

Today's reading reports on the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. John's words just prior to this reading were rather scathing. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He had been prophesying that that the Lord would come to straighten the crooked places and make level the rough ways. "All flesh," he said," shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6).

It is in response to that teaching that the crowd asked, "Then what shall we do?" John the Baptist lists a number of practices that his listeners could pursue that would demonstrate a genuine change of heart that he has been calling for. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1). A man with two coats could show his heart change by giving one to someone who had not. Likewise, with someone who has enough food; he can share.

When the tax collectors (usually men who collected more than the tax due to enlarge their own pockets) indicated they wanted to enter the waters of baptism for repentance, John tells them to collect only what is the proper tax. Soldiers also asked about their responsibility, and John pointed out what, apparently, were the illegal practices of some: taking money by force, falsely accusing people, complaining about their wages. They are to discontinue such practices.

All of this had the people conjecturing about who this prophet really was. Could he be the Messiah? John responds to clarify his role by noting his inferiority to the One he is preparing the way for. John's baptism was with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (was was to be fulfilled in Acts 2). It's interesting to note the final words of this reading, "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Yet, the preceding words are words of judgment ("winnowing fork," "burn up the chaff"). You see the gospel has two facets. It offers the free grace of God in response to faith in the work of Jesus, but it promised judgment to those who reject Jesus.

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Reflection Questions

1. In light of the second reading, list the ways in which you daily lay down your anxieties to God. Do I have the unexplainable joy and peace of God because I pray with thanksgiving and give my anxieties to Him?
2. In the Gospel reading the crowd asked John, "Then what shall we do?" to which John responded with a list of practices believers in God exhibited as evidence of their change in heart. List two ways in which your life provides this evidence of turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to living out your life for God.

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



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.

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 12-11-2016



Did you know that even as firm believers in Jesus Christ that it's natural to have doubts about our faith? There may be days when we feel like we can walk on water, but other days we feel like we are slipping down into a deep, dark, sea. Throughout history, even some of the most famous Christians have experienced moments of doubt regarding their faith. We will see in the Gospel lesson today that one of those people who experienced doubts was none other than John the Baptist. In the first reading from the Old Testament, we will also see that the people of Israel were struggling to believe in the promises of God. Isaiah was sent as a messenger to encourage God's people to keep their covenant (or relationship) with God. The passage we looked at last week sets the stage for the unfolding good news that God has not abandoned His people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading today is from Isaiah Chapter 35. Before we read the text, it's important to take note of the context, the audience to whom Isaiah was speaking, and information that we can glean from other prophetic voices in the Bible. This prophet ministered to the people of the Southern Tribes of Israel including Benjamin and Judah during the time that the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity by Assyria. Micah and Hosea were prophets speaking on behalf of God at the same time as Isaiah. His message was one of repentance and subsequent hope for the future. Isaiah was a

forerunner, one that announced the coming Messiah and his future kingdom, much like John the Baptist in the New Testament. Like the other prophets, Isaiah often saw near and far term events "telescoped" together, but even more so because of the greater range of his visions. This is called by the theological term "prophetic foreshortening." When we look back in hindsight, it's easy for us to differentiate between the near term events and those in the distant future that have yet to be fulfilled. However, when we look at the events which haven't been fulfilled yet, such as the future era known by biblical scholars as the Millennial Kingdom, it's more difficult to determine the order and timing of the events. This portion of Chapter 35 concerns the coming Kingdom which would be brought in by the Messiah. Looking back we understand that this would be fulfilled at Jesus' Second Coming. But Isaiah did not have the advantage of knowing the difference between what would happen when Jesus came the first time and what is yet to take place at His second coming. This is why it's important to understand the whole of Scripture when we read isolated portions of the prophetic Books.

As you study the first reading, pay attention to Isaiah's proclamation of the future hope for Israel and the whole world of believers, in the context of the future Millennial Kingdom.

First Reading:

1 The wilderness and the desert will be glad, And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus 2 It will blossom profusely And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, The majesty of our God. 3 Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. 4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah. 7 And the scorched land will become a pool, And the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, Grass becomes reeds and rushes. 8 And a highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, But it will be for him who walks that way, And fools will not wander on it. 9 No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, 10 And the ransomed of the LORD will return, And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:1-10)

One of the things that Isaiah looks forward to in the Millennial Kingdom reign of Jesus is that the broken parts of this earth will be restored; that includes nature and people. If we pause to assess our world, it seems that every part of it is broken at some level. Families are torn apart, lives are exhausted, fear and anxiety seem to be rampant. Although Isaiah prophesied long ago, his words are very relevant today. Isaiah's prophecy is meant to remind God's people that one day all will be well—He will set the record straight. He will save us. Those who trust in God to save them are those who are called the "redeemed" and the "ransomed" of the LORD. To be redeemed is to be bought

back or restored to one's original intent. To be ransomed is to be set free from being in the grip of an enemy with a payment. Both of these descriptions can be treasured terms of endearment for those who walk on the "Highway of Holiness" by trusting in Christ's holiness to save them.

As a Christian, it's important to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices going on around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got into the way of the Jews properly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century Jews had a good grasp on the Scriptures so many of them wouldn't have missed the First Coming of Jesus. The Jews had endured centuries of persecution from the various world powers including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. From all appearances the Prophet Micah made it very clear what would happen, even if this forerunner didn't explain the exact timing of the events. Micah said, "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). Micah named the exact town in which the Messiah would be born. Though there were two towns named Bethlehem, he differentiated between the one in the North and the one near Jerusalem in which the new King would be born. Like the other prophets, Micah also telescoped near and far term events today when he saw the kingdom of Jesus.

1 And it will come about in the last days That the mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, And the peoples will stream to it. 2 And many nations will come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD And to the house of the God of Jacob, That He may teach us about His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For from Zion will go forth the law, Even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 3 And He will judge between many peoples And render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they train for war. (Micah 4:1-3)

Micah said that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a time of peace, when weapons of war would be turned into peaceful use (v.3). In this age the city of Jerusalem would be the capital city of the universe (v.1) and the King would serve as the perfect judge over the entire world (v.3). The Jews misinterpreted this to mean that the Messiah would immediately usher in His Kingdom when he came, and who can blame them? It was only after Jesus was crucified, raised from the dead, and explained the Scriptures (Luke 24:27) to them that **some of them** understood. Even then, some doubted (Matthew 28:17).

Malachi was another prophet who called the people of God to be patient. He provided clear details about the events concerning the coming of the Messiah. In fact, Malachi announced that a forerunner, who we know as John the Baptist, would precede Jesus. He said, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). This New Testament Prophet would come in the spirit of the Prophet Elijah (John 19:21), and that Elijah would return during the coming tribulation period. Malachi said, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the

great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Exercising patience is very important especially when we expect God to come rushing in and fix the events in the fallen world. This is even more important when, like the Jews, we experience injustice at the hands of our civil rulers. In the second reading today from Saint James, we see this important leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:13) cautioning the young Church about the need to be patient concerning the return of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

7 Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. 8 You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. 10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (James 5:7-10)

James reminded us that the Prophets were an example of those who were patient and persisted through suffering and quoted from them as scriptural authority. He admonished us not to complain against one another, because living in the spirit of "unthankfulness" would bring about judgment (v.8). This hearkens back to Jesus' words: "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). James exercised authority over the believers gathered during the Jerusalem council (refer to Acts 15) and exhibited great patience towards those with whom he disagreed. One of the ways in which he did this is to claim the authority of the prophets. James said, "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written" (Acts 15:15), and then he went on to quote from the prophets. James, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was supremely wise because he rested his authority on the weight of the supremacy of Scripture by relying upon the writings of the Prophets.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson about a New Testament Prophet, I wish to have you ponder this question. Some time ago, someone asked me who I thought was the greatest man that ever lived. I responded with a question. "Do you mean the greatest man that ever 'lived' in the past tense?" "Yes in the past tense," they said. My answer was easy. I said, "John the Baptist, and the greatest Man that ever 'lives' is Jesus." Who do you think was the greatest man that ever *lived*? Study the text from the Gospel lesson and as you read, try to ascertain why the greatest man that ever lived would ask Jesus the question that he did.

Gospel Reading:

2 Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, 3 and said to

Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" 4 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6 And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." 7 And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces. 9 But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:2-11)

Why would John the Baptist, the greatest man that ever lived (v.11), send someone to ask Jesus whether he was the Messiah? Well, if you were in prison for speaking the truth and you expected the Messiah to deliver you, you might have trouble discerning whether Jesus was the promised one just like John the Baptist. The question for all of us is whether we want the real Messiah or whether we want our own version of the Messiah (someone who doesn't leave us in prison). Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Even though John was the greatest man that ever **lived* (in the physical sense, although his spirit lives forever), John the Baptist was a fallible, imperfect man. However, he was commended by Jesus for his faithfulness in fulfilling the role of the forerunner or messenger. In response to John the Baptist's question about whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus said, in so many words, YES! Since He was in the process of fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies (the blind see . . . the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life), He was reassuring John that his faith was well placed in Jesus being the Messiah of God. As we saw before, Malachi said, "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1b). Jesus clearly fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah, including Malachi, and quoted it as proof of His divinity. (Matthew 11:10).

*Jesus is the most perfect Man that ever *lives*.

John the Baptist's shortcomings stand to give Christians hope, especially during the upcoming Christmas season, which is such a difficult time for so many people. Since even the greatest man that ever lived experienced periods of doubt in his life, we too shouldn't be surprised when it happens to us. Saint Peter said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

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Reflection Questions

1. What about you, have you come to the place where you are doubting your faith? Read the advice from Jesus, the Greatest Man that Ever **Lives** and see what He has to say about coming to a place where you either confirm your faith in Him or find faith in Him for the first time.

16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:16-21)

Saint Paul explained, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Romans 10:9-10).

How do these Scriptures provide you with hope, especially during the Christmas season? Perhaps you would be willing to leave a comment on our web page or Facebook.

2. When you think of the terms "redeemed" and "ransomed" in regards to your relationship to God through Christ, how does this give you hope and patience for God to "work all things together for good" as He continues to conform you to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28-29)?

For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/ Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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