

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT A  
Isaiah 11: 1-10 Psalm 72 Romans 15: 4-9 Matthew 3: 1-12

Dear Preachers:

On the second and third Sundays of Advent a regular visitor comes around, the crusty John the Baptist. Today we have a description of John’s outfit, hardly a picture from a men’s fashion magazine—camel’s hair with a leather belt. His food---locusts and wild honey---very low fat, low carb indeed! Hard for the modern reader to identify with this gruffy desert dweller. Yet anyone familiar with the prophet Malachi (3:23), and certainly John’s contemporaries were, would understand the significance of this prophet, what he ate, how he dressed and most of all, what he was announcing. “Lo, I will send you Elijah the prophet,” was God’s promise through Malachi to a defeated people. Elijah was to return and be the forerunner of the messiah. John dressed the way Elijah did, with a “hairy garment...with leather girdle about his loins” (2 Kings 1: 8). Could John be the long awaited Elijah? Was God finally going to do something to intervene in the downward cycle people had gotten themselves into?

Today’s reading from Matthew starts a new section in the gospel. The genealogy and infancy accounts (1:1- 2:23) are concluded. Can you sense the immediacy, even abruptness, as Matthew shifts to this scene? This section starts-- “John the Baptist appeared...” It is as if Matthew is saying, “Now that we have established Jesus’ origins, let’s get busy, we have important work to do.” And the this work begins with John’s preaching and baptizing. John’s message is similar to Jesus’, “Repent the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” But John’s call to repentance does not follow with any assurance of forgiveness. John is baptizing people in the Jordan. Normally when gentiles joined the Jewish community they went through a ritual cleansing, a baptism. John is baptizing Jews who “acknowledged their sins.” He is putting them all into the same category with gentiles, cleansing for all is needed to become a truly chosen people. John is calling God’s people back to the righteous way, to living lives faithful to God’s covenant and to preparing for the one mightier than John who would forgive sin. All are being addressed in John’s message.

No one can claim any prerogative or special status before God. Pharisees and Sadducees, groups known for their observance and religious piety, approach John

for the washing. Even they are not exempt from the need to repent. Any claim they might make to being Abraham's descendants can not guarantee that they would automatically find favor with God. Our lives have to reflect the faith we proclaim. No one holds rank or privilege when they enter these Advent-preparation waters, all are expressing a need for renewal. John may seem bizarre to us, his clothes, food and intensity, but his contemporaries spotted something in him to attract them to him. Maybe they felt the heat of the divine flame in him and they wanted to come up close to it, to have their chilled hearts melted and have a chance to start over.

John admits his baptism is not enough. Jesus' baptism will be "with the Holy Spirit and fire." The holy one John is announcing will come and pour out God's Spirit on believers, giving them a new interior life, guaranteeing the fire of God's passionate love that will burn away all that separates them from God.

In order for the people to get to hear this messenger from God they are going to have to make some changes in their lives. First, they will have to let go of any preconceptions about religious propriety. They could legitimately ask, "How could the most holy and exalted God be speaking through this wild man?" Nevertheless, God does speak through this eccentric fiery prophet who has cut himself off from the usual fixtures of daily life they call indispensable; from their accustomed religious rituals and from the religious experts they normally turn to when they want to learn about God's ways. So, during these two middle weeks of Advent, with John on center stage as a reminder, we will need to keep our eyes and ears attentive to the unusual places and people God uses to break through our normal and well-crafted defenses. We may hear God speaking to us in---- the example of the 80 year old nun who knits gloves for street people; the editorial page of our newspaper; the persistent voice of one of our parish council members; the signs carried by the protestors in our town square; the religious leaders speaking for peace in a time of war; the gay and lesbian activists....You get the picture. God may be speaking to us in the least likely places, in the most unusual people. This Advent is an invitation to listen more closely, to travel out of our comfort zone to a place where the prophet waits to speak to us.

The people who heard the abrupt-graced voice of John got to hear him by making a trek out into the desert. God certainly speaks in our daily lives; but if John the Baptist is any clue, God also speaks out in the desert places. Who can find any

time to get away to a retreat house, the mountains, sea shore or desert during these most hectic days of the year? Most of us can't. However, we do need to figure out a way, maybe over early morning coffee—minus the morning paper or just before retiring—minus the late night tv comics, to take a few breaks, quiet down and listen. Perhaps we will discover the gift John promised Jesus would bring, “the Holy Spirit and fire.”

John the Baptist did not just have a message for “back then,” before Jesus. Now that Jesus has come, why can't we just put John aside as pre-Jesus? We can't because we need his urgent reminder. He is the preacher who continues to sound his message in mid-Advent--prepare for the One coming and his baptism “in the Holy Spirit and fire.” Our participation at liturgy this day helps us respond to John's invitation to “prepare the way of the Lord.” These may even have been the words of our opening hymn this morning.

Just as the people went out to find and listen to John, coming to worship this morning was our trek to another place, like the desert of Judea. For a while at least, we have left behind the normal routine and occupations of daily life. Certainly there are a lot of things on our “to-do list” at home and some of them are probably running through our brains right now! But we stopped, gathered ourselves and family to make the journey to this place to prepare the way of the Lord by hearing these readings. Soon we will receive the bread and cup that re-immerses us into the Holy Spirit and the cleansing fire of God. Don't we yearn for this Spirit right now? Don't we yearn for something new, something pure, something to hope in for ourselves, and this tired old, battered world of ours? Let us go together and hunt for God this Advent. Let us do SOMETHING to prepare for a new entrance of God into our world. Let us make a straight path to God where we can lay down past records of wrongs and have a chance to start all over again—the threshing floor cleared of chaff and burned, the wheat gathered into barns.

While we are reflecting over that early coffee or late night break we can let Advent possibilities stir our imaginations. So....what would it be like to have broken relationships healed? Tense marriages become more loving? Owning fewer things but being more satisfied? A world at peace? Honest political processes? A renewed natural environment? Homelessness a thing of the past? Adequate health care for all? Racial harmony? No more ethnic or religious wars? Dream on--- and

do something about it! Prepare the way of the Lord. You do believe that you were baptized in the Spirit and fire, don't you? Or is John the Baptist misleading us today?

This week, starting December 9<sup>th</sup>, the Jewish community celebrates the feast of Hanukkah (which means, "dedication"). It is a feast lasting 8 days and recalls the victory in 165 B.C.E. of Judas Maccabeus and his small band of followers over the Syrian forces of Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus had profaned the Temple with images of Greek gods. In addition, the Jews were forced to adopt the religion of the Greeks and worship these gods. With Judas' victory the temple was once again in Jewish hands. When they entered the Temple, they found the eternal flame in front of the Ark of the Covenant extinguished. When they looked for oil for the flame, all they could find was enough for one day of the rededication ceremony. Yet the flame burnt for the full eight days. During each day of this festival, Jews light another candle on the menorah. There is also a center candle on the menorah, the "servant" candle, used to light the other eight.

The Jewish

Community and our Celebration of Advent:

The first readings in our Lectionary have been chosen in light of the Gospel selection, because they "point to their fulfillment" in Christ. To put it simply, we see the promise in the Hebrew Scriptures (1st. reading) and the fulfillment in the New Testament (Gospel selection). But this treatment of the former texts does not do them justice. The Hebrew texts should not just be seen as preparing the way for Christ. The prophetic message they contain still speaks to our generation and we need to read them and appreciate the message they still hold for us.

Advent is an excellent time for the preacher to focus a preaching from the first readings. A useful publication for more reflection of this relationship between the two testaments and its consequences for our preaching, can be found in the Bishops' booklet *God's Mercy Endures Forever*. The helpful, *SOURCEBOOK FOR SUNDAYS AND SEASON*, (Liturgy Training Publications) quotes the bishops' document and can serve as a guideline for Advent preaching:

"The lectionary readings from the prophets are selected to bring out the ancient Christian theme that Jesus is the "fulfillment" of the biblical message of hope and promise, the inauguration of the "days to come" described, for example,

in the daily Advent Masses, and on Sundays by Isaiah in Cycle A and Jeremiah in Cycle C for the first Sunday of Advent. This truth needs to be framed very carefully. Christians believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah who has come (see Luke 4:22), but also know that his messianic kingdom is not yet fully realized. The ancient messianic prophecies are not merely temporal predictions but profound expressions of eschatological hope. Since this dimension can be misunderstood or even missed altogether, the homilists needs to raise clearly the hope found in the prophets and heightened in the proclamation of Christ. This hope includes trust in what is promised but not yet seen. While the biblical prophecies of an age of universal "shalom" are "fulfilled" (i.e. irreversibly inaugurated) in Christ's coming, that fulfillment is not yet completely worked out in each person's life or perfected in the world at large.....It is the mission of the church, and also that of the Jewish people, to proclaim and to work to prepare the world for the full flowering of God's reign, which is but is "not yet"....Both the Christian "Our Father" and the Jewish "Kaddish" exemplify this message. Thus, both Christianity and Judaism seal their worship with a common hope: `Thy kingdom come!'"

## JUSTICE NOTES:

### TO OUR COMMON CAUSE

A litany of the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington

In an era when the forces of division and decay abound, we religious communities in the metropolitan Washington area have dared to come together.

-We come together because our love for God and humanity inspires it; our concern for justice, freedom and peace demands it; and what we learn from each other requires it;.

Baha'i, Hindu-Jain, Islamic, Jewish, latter-day Saints, Protestant, Roman Catholics and Sikh, we have begun to listen together to the spirit within our varied and venerable traditions.

-In spite of our differences, we share many principles which spring forth from the teaching of each of our faith traditions.

-A conviction of the fundamental unity of the human family under God and the equality and dignity of all human beings.

- A sense of the sacredness of the individual person and each one's conscience.
- A realization that might is not right; that human powers not self-sufficient or absolute, and that in God is our trust.
- A belief that love, compassion, selflessness, and the force of inner truthfulness and the spirit have ultimately greater power than hate, enmity, and inordinate self-interest.
- '-A sense of obligation to stand on the side of the poor, the hungry and the oppressed, and to serve the cause of justice.
- A profound hope that good finally will prevail.

Because we affirm these convictions held in common, we also affirm one another in our different religious and cultural expressions. Because we affirm our differences, we also affirm the validity of the diverse efforts and gifts which we each bring to the common cause of improving our community. Because we affirm our community, we also affirm our commitment to stand together as a unified force for its social and moral benefit, and to be symbol of living together in diversity which the creator intends for all creation.

—quoted in, WOODSTOCK REPORT, October 2001

### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and

<http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

### **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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