

## **First Impressions 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT (A)**

Isaiah 35: 1-6a, 10 Psalm 146 James 5: 7-10 Matthew 11: 2-11

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today Isaiah describes people traveling on, what one commentator calls, "the holy highway." Where are the people going? They are not setting out on a holiday excursion; nor jumping in the car to see friends and family for the weekend. In fact, they aren't going away---they are coming home. (It's a shame our lectionary leaves out the verses 8 and 9 with their clear reference, "a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the holy way ... the redeemed shall walk there.")

God's people were dispersed. Our passage today isn't speaking just to the exiled in Babylon; but to all those scattered throughout the world. God is bringing them back and nature is sharing in their joy. "The desert and parched land will exult..." Indeed, nature is transformed from a desert wilderness into a blooming garden so that the travelers will be refreshed and delighted on the journey itself.

In last week's first reading (Isaiah 11:1-10), nature was transformed. Humans and even wild animals were shown living in peace ("the baby shall play by the cobra's den"). In today's reading, the land seems to be reaching out to support the people returning to Zion. The once hostile wilderness has turned into a lush environment to make their trip easier. Why? Because they are a weakened and dispirited people; not just physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well. After all, they have been living among people who did not share their faith and in many cases were hostile to them because of their beliefs.

The "glory of the Lord" is to be made known to the people because God has intervened and has prepared a "holy highway" for their trip. God is making it as easy as possible for their return to their spiritual home. There is a wonderful image in the closing line, "sorrow and mourning will flee." The people joyfully enter through the front door and misery rushes out the back!

Old Testament faith is very much rooted in the land---after all, God promised the people they would have a bountiful land to live on; a place where they would be secure. Isaiah reminds us that God uses the natural world to support the flagging spirits of the community making its way back to its spiritual home with God. Thus, images from nature are frequently used to communicate God's gifts and grace. Christianity is also rooted in nature since our sacraments signal God's

actions in our lives. We use water, salt, oil, bread, wine, etc. in our rituals. Environmentalists are helping us grow in the awareness that we moderns are trampling on the natural and sacramental gifts God has given us. Suppose it gets harder and harder to find clear water to baptize. What kind of sign would dirty water be of God's cleansing action? Will we have to go and buy bottled water for baptisms?

Not all of us are going through difficult moments at this stage of our life's journey. The strong among the returnees are told to "strengthen the hands that are feeble." We are members of a traveling community, people together on a pilgrimage. Look around, who needs a helping hand; an encouraging or corrective word; medicine for an illness; food for a family; or a welcome into an already-formed congregation?

These Advent Isaian passages remind me of what parents do for frightened or hurt children. They pick them up, sit them on their laps and speak comforting words, "There, there, everything is going to be all right." But the child is hurt and scared and everything is not all right now. The voice and the words of their parents are soothing and give hope. The tremulous child knows he/ she can trust the parent to speak the truth. So, the child is comforted even though the scraped knee still stings and bleeds. We are still in, what the old prayer called, "this vale of tears." We don't know or see how things are going to turn out. But we hear the comforting and reassuring words our God speaks through the prophet Isaiah and we have hope.

There are not many vistas in our world that are blooming and strewn with flowers. The "desert and the parched land" have nothing to exult over--yet. Too many people in the world live in an emotional, physical or spiritual wasteland. Many are vulnerable, hurt and frightened. The voices of those around us paint pictures of doom and gloom--and they have ample reason to do so. But Isaiah's words suggest strongly that all the evidence isn't in yet. There's more to the picture than we can see. The scriptures today, all three readings (and the psalm as well), give us other vistas than the present ones in the world that haunt our dreams. God says to us children, "There, there, everything is going to be OK." It isn't yet! These Advent scriptures aren't spelling out the future in its specifics. But they do give us a perspective on the future and they assure us that God intends to finish the work of creation with a final blessing born out of love. God will vindicate the good we have done and absolutely overcome evil.

Shall we just sit back and wait till God solves the world's problems for us? No, for the biblical perspective on our future helps us do something about our present. We can fashion our lives according to the biblical view we hear weekly in these texts. We live between the times, awaiting the new age God is bringing. In the meantime, we know from the prophets and from Christ the world God wants for us. So, formed by that vision, let us set about loving and protecting the human community and the natural world, for in them lies the potential to meet our God.

We know that the future belongs to God, but here in this life we get a foretaste of what the future with God will be like. Jesus' spells out for John the Baptist's disciples what our future holds--God's full healing. Jesus sends back a message to John in which he describes his own ministry: "the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." That is what Jesus began and that is what we are to do until Christ returns, find ways to: give instruction and sight to the blind; enable those who are trapped in debilitating situations to get up and move on; accept those on the outside of society; and be good news to those who haven't yet heard it and hope of a new life to those who have given up.

Last week Matthew introduced John the Baptist, the precursor of the longed-for Messiah. Repent, John told us, for God's kingdom is close at hand. John was a powerful witness to God's word, but as we heard last week, while he could call people to repentance, he couldn't give them what they really needed--forgiveness. Today's gospel fills in the story begun last week. The Baptist predicted that when the Messiah came, he would return armed with "a winnowing fork in his hand. . . to clear his threshing floor. . . the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:12). Sounds scary! Was Jesus a disappointment to John? Where was the harsh, fiery judgment the Baptist anticipated?

Like John, Jesus preached repentance, but with it he offered mercy and healing. John is in prison and cannot ask Jesus himself, so he sends his disciples to raise the critical question on his mind, "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?"

Jesus' may not have been the fiery judge John had in mind, but Jesus sends back an important and encouraging message to John: Jesus has come as the prophet Isaiah anticipated (29:18-19, and today's first reading), to save people through God's forgiveness. That's how God judges us: through Jesus and with mercy. Judgment has come and mercy is the decision rendered by the judge

We are an Advent people who live in hope and trust in God's promises. We followers of Jesus are also a continuation of his presence in the world. What he said about himself and his ministry of healing to the blind, lame, lepers etc., is now up to us to continue. The Advent scriptures ask us to live the mystery of Christ in our time. It is clear from Jesus' response to John that he did not withdraw from engagement with the world; he did not call a small band of elite to live a privatized code of rules and regulation; did not form a military band of rebels.

What he did was confront the world's evils through healing and forgiveness. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled when people met Christ, "Here is your God. . . who comes to save you." Now we, his church, are to "go and tell" what we have seen and heard in Christ. We do this by: giving sight to those who cannot see; by enabling the physical and emotional crippled; communicating with those who are disenfranchised by church and society; finding ways to give value to human life and in so doing become, like Jesus, good news to the poor and oppressed.

### QUOTABLE

"The Minor Prophets" by Michael Lind, from *Parallel Lives*. © Etruscan Press, 2008

#### The Minor Prophets

None of the minor prophets  
knew that he was minor, of course. Habakkuk, I imagine,  
thought that his visions earned him  
standing as Ezekiel's peer, if not indeed Elijah's.  
Then there was Obadiah,  
who could be forgiven if he thought he might be a Moses.  
How they would be remembered  
Providence concealed from them all, though they could see the future.

Maybe it doesn't matter.  
If you're on a mission from God, sent to rebuke a city  
or to redeem a nation,  
where by cannon-makers you're ranked may be inconsequential.  
Nor is the voice within you  
any less authentic for not having a distant echo. Seers of the world, be heartened.  
Even minor prophets can have genuine revelations.

----reprinted from "The Writer's Almanac," Garrison Keeler, November 9, 2007 (a daily email service)

## JUSTICE NOTES

***"The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom."(Isaiah 35: 1)***

"Pope Benedict XVI in the homily given at his Mass on inauguration as pope raised the spectre of the deserts that are growing on the planet, deserts that are both spiritual and material. The pope said that it cannot be a matter of unconcern that so many of our contemporaries are living in the desert. "There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment...These external deserts are growing", he asserted, "because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction".  
<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/personal.shtml>

### Faithful Stewards of God's Creation: A Catholic Resource for Environmental Justice and Climate Change

"As people of Faith, we are convinced that "the earth is the Lord's and all it holds...we believe our response to global climate change should be a sign of our respect for God's creation. Today, there is a particular and pressing responsibility to examine and act on the growing challenge of global climate change and its implications for God's creation and for the poor and vulnerable. At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both 'the human environment' and the natural environment." (*Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good, US Catholic Bishops, 2001*) **Read and study the US Catholic Bishops' website** [www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/index.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/index.shtml).

#### What can I do? (Suggestions from the US Catholic Bishops)

- Ενχουραγε λαωμακερσ το ιμπροπε ανδ υπδατε πυβλιχ τρανσπορτατιον.
- Θοιν λοχαλ εφφορτσ οφ γρουπς ωορκινγ το εξπλορε ωαψς ψουρ χιτψ χαν δο βυσινεσσ ανδ ρεδυχε η αρμφυλ εμισσιονς.
- Υργε τηατ ανψ λεγισλατιψε αχτιον ον χλιματε χηανγε ινχλυδε προπισιονς τηατ: (1) εασε τηε βυρδεν ον ποορ πεοπλε; (2) οφφερ σομε ρελιεφ φορ ωορκερς ωο μαψ βε διςπλαχεδ βεχαυσε οφ χλιματε χηανγε π ολιχιεσ; ανδ (3) προμοτε τηε δεπελοπμεντ ανδ υσε οφ αλτερνατε ρενεωαβλε ανδ χλεαν-ενεργψ ρεσουρχε σ.
- Ωριτε το ψουρ Σενατορς ανδ Ρεπρεσεντατιβεσ ιν Χονγρεσσ ανδ λετ τηεμ κνωω τηατ ψου χαρε αβουτ χλιματε χηανγε ανδ συππορτ αχτιον ον α λοχαλ ανδ νατιοναλ λεπελ τηατ ινχλυδεσ τηε τηρεε κεψ πριορ ιτιεσ αβοπε.

<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate>.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

There are currently **four women on death row** in North Carolina..

Christina Waleter #0626944 (On death row since 7/6/00)

Carlette Parker #0311386 (4/1/99)

Blance T. Moore #0288088 (11/16/90)  
Patrica W. Jennings #0207779 (11/5/90)  
-----NC Correctional Institution for Women  
1034 Bragg St  
Raleigh, NC 27610

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**  
**“Liturgical year A,”** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**“Liturgical years, A, B and C,”** reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com) and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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