

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2ND. SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C)
Baruch 5: 1-9 Psalm 126 Philippians 1: 4-6, 8-11 Luke 3: 1-6
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

What an unusual beginning today's gospel passage has! Usually such passages open with expressions like: "At that time. . .," "In those days. . .," "Early in the morning. . .," "On the Sabbath. . .," etc. Or, some narratives begin with no allusion to time or place at all: "Jesus said to the crowds. . .," "Jesus addressed this parable to the crowds. . .," etc. How different today's gospel is: half of it is dedicated to dates, places and specific people of authority. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. . . etc." Luke is too careful a writer not to have something in mind. His specificity suggests a message—the actions of God on our behalf have taken place in very concrete ways—on certain days and in particular places. In other words, God acts in our human history in specific and discernible ways. This unique Gospel opening invites us to look over the realities of our own lives and to notice God's gracious acts on our behalf in the daily routines—through the almost casual events and repetitious happenings at home, work, leisure and worship.

But God also enters our lives in entirely new and unpredictable ways. The gospel suggests that at a particular moment in the world's history, while civil and religious powers ruled in their own worlds of influence, God stepped in to change the course of events, to introduce to the world a whole new way of living. God spoke a word to John in the desert, and from that barren and still place the word was heard and passed on to others.

It may seem idealistic to encourage people to take time out for quiet and reflection at a time of the year that drives most of us to distraction and frantic activity. But some kind of desert moment does seem to be the necessary atmosphere for hearing God. It needn't take much time. I know a letter carrier who, on his way in from his delivery route, stops off at a church for five minutes each day. He says, "I like the quiet, it soothes me. My life is so busy and crazy these days." He is doing an Advent practice. "The word of God came to 'N'....in the desert." Fill in your own name here; God doesn't restrict the Word to just a select few. In fact, the gospel shows us today that, though people like Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphus may have been prominent and well known by the populace of their day, God chose to speak to an obscure itinerant preacher in the hill country of Judea.

The desert is such a rich biblical symbol. Devout people in John's time were attuned to their religious history. The desert played an important role for the Jews, it was their escape route from Egyptian slavery. It was also where God spoke to them, revealed God's name and led them day by arduous day to the land of promise. From their desert experience the people learned that God's advent—God's coming to fulfill the long awaited promise—happens after a period of preparation and high expectation. Our Advent waiting and yearning also have the same potential for fulfillment.

John the Baptist plays a prominent role in all the gospels, but particularly in Luke. (For example, the evangelist presents us with the accounts of both John and Jesus' annunciations and births.) John hears the Word in the desert and preaches "throughout the whole region of the Jordan." The Jordan was another important place in the faith life of the Jewish believers. After their desert wanderings the people crossed over the Jordan river into the promise land. They left behind slavery, came to know God in the desert and were finally prepared by God to cross into new life. Today this reference to the Jordan's water reminds us Christians of our baptism.

Those baptismal waters were not just part of some past ritual; they initiated us into a new way of life. These waters have accompanied us throughout our lives; they led us out of slavery, traveled with us across our own desert terrain and bubbled up at important moments when we would have given up or when we lost our way. Advent is a time to call on our baptismal identity to ask for help: to straighten out our life's path if it has developed twists and turns; to lower the mountains and hills we have built to separate us from family members and the world around us; to fill in the valleys of our emptiness and longing for God.

There are lots of changes in today's readings. The Baruch reading starts with a change of clothing, "Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory." There is also a change of name; the people in exile are told that the devastated Jerusalem will be given a new name, "the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship." John the Baptist calls people to change and show the results of change—that our valleys are filled, our paths are made straight and mountains and hills lowered. Advent is a time of change as we struggle to hear God's word and do our best to respond to it. This word opens our hearts, fills us with the hope that we can more fully turn back to our God. Like the Jews journeying across the desert to their promised place, our hope is stirred for what lies ahead. Our God accompanies us on our journey, as Baruch promised, "...God will bring them back to you...God is leading Israel in joy...by the light of God's glory...."

We remember hearing in other gospel passages that John made people uncomfortable. No one, then or now, wants to hear that they must change. Maybe John had to preach out in the desert because neither Roman rulers nor high religious authorities wanted him in court or temple precincts. He would have upset the status quo and challenged the compromises religious leadership had worked out with the secular government. This "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," sounds like sacrifice is going to be asked of us, as well as an admission of wrong doing. Our society doesn't like that kind of talk. Neither do religious institutions. In the recent church scandals, some of those sinned against said they just wanted church leaders to admit they were wrong and give them a sincere apology.

John says that God is about to break into our lives. Advent does not carry the same tone of penitence that Lent does. Nevertheless, openness to the next thing God wants to do in our lives may first require from us what John was asking at the Jordan's waters—"repentance for the forgiveness of sin." Our baptismal waters assure us that forgiveness is readily available. In addition, this season reminds us that God is also ever ready to speak again at this present stage of

our journey. We noted that Luke is very specific about the time and place God spoke the Word to John. The evangelist is also telling us that at THIS time and in THIS place God has a Word for us. Not only for us as individuals, but for this worshipping community. When such a Word is received with a ready heart, we are gently carried further along our way to God. Our church, recently tripped up, needs to hear that Word anew this day, in this place of worship, for we must be a sign to the world, that a new and healed life is possible.

The setting has changed since the prophet John was called by God's word in the desert—but not as much as it first seems. We too are in the wilderness, though we live in great cities and brush shoulders with many people constantly. We live in the wilderness of isolation that, as Karl Rahner reminds us, has no center and is not a home for us. We too must also confront the beasts in our wilderness: beasts of aggression, war, competition, greed, and the lust for still more property and power. We in the church must be sign that another way of living is possible where there are no hills, mountains, valleys or crooked roads to separate us from each other.

John the Baptist was expecting some thing wonderful and new to happen, "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...." We pray that this Advent will open our eyes to see the wonderful and new things God is promising for us, in this present moment and in this place.

JUSTICE NOTES

UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS----GENEVA

Message of Mr. Bertrand Ramcharan, Acting UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women 25 November 2003

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women takes place this year at a time when we are also marking the tenth anniversary of the Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the General Assembly in 1993. This triple anniversary provides both an opportunity to assess progress achieved in the advancement of women's rights and the actions still required to meet the challenges ahead. The Vienna World Conference was a watershed for women's human rights. It acknowledged that "women's rights are human rights". Shortly after the Vienna Conference, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing adopted a Platform for Action which remains a crucial landmark in the recognition of women's human rights. Some progress has been made in the development of human rights standards at the international, regional and national levels. A recent example is the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which received its 40th ratification at the end of September and will come into force on 26 December 2003. However, despite international commitments made by Governments to end violence against women, it remains an endemic crisis in all regions of the world. Governments must provide the leadership to make the end of violence against women a reality.

The challenge ahead is to implement these standards on the ground and to save women's lives! This must be done through national human rights protection systems. Each country must strive to

absorb and implement the international norms for the protection and promotion of women's rights and freedoms. Each country's constitution and laws should be reflective of international human rights norms and its courts should be able to draw upon those laws. Each country must take every possible step, in consultation with human rights defenders, academics and other experts to prevent, investigate and prosecute violence against women and provide support and remedies to victim-survivors of such violence. This duty to act with due diligence extends to violations by both State and non-State actors. Each country should provide human rights education, have specialized national human rights institutions, and should be monitoring the situation of women with a view to detecting key areas where resources are needed to prevent violations of their rights.

On this International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, I call on all Member States which have not done so to ratify or accede to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its protocol, and I urge governments and civil society alike to act on the recommendations made by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences; other Special Procedures of the Commission on Human Rights; and the UN treaty bodies. Protecting the rights and interests of women has never been more urgent, and is the responsibility of all of us. We must work together to confront and erase this scourge inflicted upon half of humanity! Women's lives depend upon it.

I make a special appeal for international mobilization against the trafficking in women. It is my strong hope that 2004 will see a rallying of conscience against this evil phenomenon.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: “FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C” This compilation, from past “First Impressions,” includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

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 address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.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, Leobardo Almazan, 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 or 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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com