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2nd Sunday of Advent

Date: Sunday, December 4, 2016 | **Season:** Advent | **Year:** A
First Reading: Isaiah 11:1–10
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 72:1–2, 7–8, 12–13, 17 | **Response:** Psalm 72:7
Second Reading: Romans 15:4–9
Gospel Acclamation: Luke 3:4, 6
Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1–12
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

> "…The voice of one crying in the wilderness"

In today's readings we hear from three voices who bring messages of hope to us this Advent.

The first voice is from the prophet Isaiah, who lived in a time when Israel had some underwhelming and despicable kings. Isaiah is a prophet who hopes that one day a new shoot of life will sprout from the old stump of Israel's kingdom. He hopes for a king like David, who will rely not on political advisors but on God alone, a king who will bring justice and peace, especially to those who are poor and afflicted. Isaiah, our first voice, is a voice of hope – a voice of hope that a future King will come. Perhaps we in this country need to cling to that hope too.

The second Advent voice we heard today was that of St. Paul, who tells the Christian community in Rome that all the Jewish and Gentile Christians will live in hope and accept one another so that they will live in harmony and peace. Paul, our second voice, is a voice of hope – a voice of hope that Kingdoms will come together in peace and harmony.

The third Advent voice we heard today is a voice crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

There is something new and surprising in this prophet – he is in the desert. He does not preach in Jerusalem like Isaiah and the other prophets; he lived apart from the elite of the temple – which, remember, Jews believed was the House of

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God or the Mountain of the Lord as we heard last week. Nor is he a prophet of the court; he has moved far away from the palace of Herod Antipas. The desert is a place that cannot be easily controlled by any power.

But what is it about the desert that seems so necessary as the unlikely place for this proclamation? On the one hand, the decrees of Rome do not reach as far as the desert; neither do the orders of Herod. The din and bustle of the temple is not heard there; neither do they hear the discussions of the teachers on the Law. Rather, interesting things happen in the desert in the Bible and in the Church – Israel wandered in the Desert; Jesus spent time in the Desert; and in the early Church the first forms of monastic life were started in the Desert. There is something about deserts that connect with spirituality? And John the Baptist had something that attracted all those people to go out to the desert to hear him and to be baptized by him in the river Jordan. I think it must have been something about him that led people to hope. We see it in our own day – with the Prophet of Doom – people are desperate to hope. But our hope, unlike the insecticide, is in a real person.

John the Baptist, our third voice, is a voice of hope – a voice that the Messiah is about to come, and so we must repent and prepare ourselves.

Deserts are physically a place where one can listen to God in silence and solitude. But in our own spiritual lives we sometimes encounter deserts – places of dryness and alone-ness. Despite what we might think, these times, these places, are the best place to begin turning to God, to begin preparing the way to Jesus.

This is precisely the message of John: “Repent; prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths”. This «way of the Lord» is not the Roman roads through which the legions of Tiberius marched. These paths are no avenues leading to the temple.

John the Baptist is heralding the coming of Jesus, who is a Son of David from the stock of Jesse that Isaiah foretold, and upon whom we see at the Baptism by John at the Jordan the Spirit of the Lord resting upon him. He has the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and fear of the Lord.

Isaiah foretells a time of peace – when the Prince of Peace whom we await this Advent will come – when the child can play with the snake, and the ox and lion eat together. But John tells us we need to repent – we need to feel remorse and

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change our attitudes.

Let us think today what are the attitudes that need changing in our lives? How ready are we to welcome the Messiah. Surely we all need conversion. And conversion happens at different levels, at different times and at different paces. But let us use this Advent, this desert period if you will, as a time to examine what we need to do to prepare our hearts and minds, our bodies and souls, to welcome Jesus back into our lives.

Our desire to convert must always be accompanied by some small action. Yesterday in the Parish we had a very successful Homeless Christmas Lunch, a work that surely helps many of us to convert our hearts during Advent. I want to thank everyone who contributed and helped organize yesterday – I know that it didn't happen overnight or without effort – but the smiles on the faces of the people, and their sincere thanks and gratitude were heartwarming. There is something about a smile that struck me yesterday, and I'd like to connect it to this message of hope.

Anyone of us who has seen a newborn baby probably started smiling before they realized they were doing that. There is something about babies that makes people smile. Just as great as God is looking at us, perhaps we can imagine that we are babies in comparison to God's greatness – and if we are made in God's image, don't we think that God is smiling at us too – just as we do when we smile at a baby? That is the hope I'd like you to think about this week – the hope that was foretold by our three voices of the coming of God's Kingdom into the World, the restoration of the line of David and the coming of the Messiah – the God who is looking at us and smiling and reaching out for us to follow him.

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