

[Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; Psalm 126; Phil 1:4-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6]

“Prepare the Way of the Lord!” How are we preparing?

The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent remind us that this liturgical season is a time of spiritual preparation: While we're shopping for gifts, decorating, and sending Christmas cards, what are we doing to make Christmas a new rebirth of Christ for our daily lives? In our Responsorial Psalm today, we proclaim: "The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy!" Do you actually feel joyful? It takes faith to experience joy in the midst of hardships. Faith grows from knowing that the Lord does great things for us because of His mercy. Repenting from our sins opens us to become aware of this mercy. Therefore, Saint John the Baptizer is proclaiming to us today: "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

Now is the time to ask: What preparations do I need to make? What am I doing to straighten out the messes in my life, the areas of sin that continually distract me from a close relationship with Christ? What penances will help "make straight" my path? What depressing or discouraging valley of hardship needs to get filled with the joy of the Lord? If it seems hopeless, what will I do to let Jesus take charge of it? What mountain of debt or difficult obstacle needs to be made low by having faith in the Lord's digging tools? What's twisted and warped in my thinking, like a road that winds through a jungle of confusion?

We may identify with struggles. These also may be the kinds of folks who will be joining us for Mass at Christmas as guests, visitors or “regulars.”

Throughout Advent, let us examine the ways in which we still need to see the salvation of God. Let us make a plan of action to be holier and happier. As we continue to “Unleash the Gospel,” there is another step we are invited to become a part of. It involves a radical kind of hospitality.

A few decades ago pundits were predicting the demise of the once mighty and proud city of New York. It had become in too many people's minds virtually ungovernable, incredibly dirty, frighteningly dangerous, and so, totally uninviting.

Almost in desperation, the “I LOVE N. Y.” advertising campaign was launched to counter those attitudes. And somehow it worked. The city not only

has survived, but despite horrendous tragedies like 9-11 and power blackouts, it has thrived. The “I (heart) fill in the blank has appeared in other campaigns.

Isaiah the prophet trumpets the call: “Up, Jerusalem!” touting the glories of the centerpiece of God’s chosen and holy land. It is a special place where God makes known the divine role that God plays in the lives of God’s chosen people. Isaiah is doing quite a public relations job.

We could say the same thing about John the Baptizer. He draws people to the waters of the Jordan River outside of Jerusalem, taking its muddy, lackluster waters and turning them into something special, attracting crowds of pious pilgrims and curious onlookers.

I had the blessing of going to the Jordan River on pilgrimage when I was a seminarian. My classmates invited me to join them in that muddy, messy water. I declined. I enjoyed watching them pouring the sludge over each other. I’m sure they needed a bath with antiseptic wash after their Jordan baptism!

All this is being done to remind us that the Messiah is coming soon to Jerusalem and will make what is special even more special. John the Baptizer entices us with his message of repentance and anticipation. As the birth of Jesus approaches, we who are the Church, the “new” Jerusalem, repent and anticipate its growing even more special. We can grow this parish of St. Martin de Porres!

Christmas means warmth and togetherness, generosity, remembrance, and surprise. It is an invitation to care about everyone, even those we routinely ignore or forget. Christmas is the season of peace on earth, a time for draining the moat and lowering the drawbridge, for forgiveness and coming home.

Christmas is our annual opportunity to be born again in spirit and in truth.

It is well known that in most parishes, the greatest attended Masses during the entire year are the Christmas Masses. That is true here. Easter Sunday would be the second most popular.

There will be two Masses on Monday, December 24<sup>th</sup> at 5 PM and 10 PM, and on Tuesday, December 25<sup>th</sup> at 8:30 AM and 11 AM. If you are planning to join us for Christmas, in addition to needing your help as lectors, altar servers and ushers, we also need your help as one-time-only greeters before and after

each Mass. Your “job description” will be simple: SMILE and WELCOME our guests!

We ask that you arrive twenty minutes before Mass. Offer words of welcome and direction or assistance if needed. After Mass, help us distribute special booklets and thank-you cards to our visitors and “regulars” as they exit the church. This is how we are planning to make this Christmas a time of “Radical Hospitality” this year.

When I visited the Methodist Church in New Baltimore many years ago, I was impressed and bit overwhelmed at the number of greeters they had there for the Good Friday ecumenical service. As I walked from the parking lot to the sidewalk, there was someone nearby to greet me: “Welcome, Fr. Nick!” As I walked up to the doors of the church, another greeter, “Welcome, Fr. Nick!” as I entered the Gathering Area, a third greeter, “Welcome, Fr. Nick!” As I entered the church, a fourth greeter started to speak. I said, “I know, I know, I’m welcomed here!” THAT’S the kind of welcome I want to see us extend to our guests, visitors and “regulars.” I would like to see married couples and families participate in this ministry of greeter as well.

You will have a chance to sign up next weekend. Please take this to prayerful discernment. Please think about this and pray about this. Help us to make this Christmas a radical way for us to “Unleash the Gospel!” AMEN!