

## Homily for Sunday, Dec. 5, 2021 – Second Sunday of Advent



*The great rabbi was dying, and as we all know, deathbed wisdom is the best. So, his students lined up, single file, to receive his last words. The most brilliant student was by his bedside, the second most brilliant immediately behind him, and so on till the line ended at a pleasant enough fellow who was a good room and a half away. The most brilliant student leaned over to the slowly*

*slipping rabbi and asked, “Rabbi, what is the meaning of life? The rabbi groaned, “Life is a river.” The most brilliant student turned to the second most brilliant student. “The rabbi said, ‘Life is a river.’” And the word was whispered from student to student till it arrived at the pleasant enough fellow who was biting his nails a room and a half away. “What does the rabbi mean, ‘Life is a river?’” And the word was passed back up the line till the most brilliant student leaned once again over the slowly slipping rabbi. “Rabbi, what do you mean, ‘Life is a river?’” The rabbi shrugged, “So, maybe it’s not a river.”*

I like that little story. I’m sure the rabbi, over his lifetime did have much wisdom to dispense to whomever wanted it, otherwise the students never would have gathered at his deathbed. However, his answer at the end (“So, maybe life is not a river”), wasn’t the most profound thing that ever came out of his mouth. Nevertheless, they leaned in because the rabbi had some credentials, some credibility, some authority.

Whenever we want our cause to be promoted, our opinion to be substantiated, we like to have a heavyweight in our corner. We like to be able to say, “This authority figure is saying the same thing I am saying, so, you need to take me seriously.” I use that logic all the time, during homilies and in regular conversation, when I quote a person whose spiritual insights are way beyond my own. When an author wants to get their book published and sold, it’s never a bad thing to have Oprah Winfrey endorse it. Speaking of books, up until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some female writers, unfortunately, had to publish their writings under a male

pseudonym just to be taken seriously as a credible writer. They had to piggy back on a male name because their female name was not deemed “good enough” to sell books.

This is the case of two of the most important Biblical writers we hear in Advent: Baruch, whom we heard from in that first reading and Isaiah. Baruch lived during the Deportation of the Israelites to Babylon around 587 B.C. After 50 years, their exile was over; a new day was dawning (“**Look toward the east**”; that’s where the sun rises to begin a new day). Their liberation was at hand; they could finally come home. Baruch said in that first reading, “**You went out on foot, led away by your enemies; but God will bring you back. But you will not come back on foot; you will be carried in glory on royal thrones.**” What a difference—from humility to glory. This is good news. No matter what struggle you endure in this life, and it may last 50 years, it is not God’s ultimate plan for you. You were meant to share in God’s glory. Baruch goes on to say something that Isaiah also says, and hundreds of years later, John the Baptist says: “**The valleys will be raised up, the hills made low, and the path between you and God will be made straight.**”

Getting back to authors and authority, scholars now know that the Prophet Baruch did not write the Book of Baruch in which we find these wonderful words of hope. Also, much of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, filled with hope that the Messiah is coming, was not written by Isaiah. They were written by pseudo-authors, people who received no fame or recognition, people whose names are lost to history. However, getting credit wasn’t important to them. What is important is that God still used them to bring good news into the lives of people who, so desperately needed good news. These anonymous people allowed themselves to be used by God. They were not the wise rabbi on his deathbed; they were the faithful students leaning in hoping to receive good news and pass it down the line to others who would follow.

Today’s gospel passage starts: ***In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.*** All this name dropping of important rulers serves a couple of purposes. Firstly, it situates Jesus’s life in real time. God has broken into the human story in a particular form—Jesus—

at a particular time, and in a particular place. Without A.D. and B.C. to situate our historic events, we might be likely to say something similar, “When Justin Trudeau was prime minister, and Joe Biden was president and Queen Elizabeth was reigning for 68 years...the word of God came to us!”

So, mentioning these power brokers in Biblical times situates us in history. But, it serves another purpose. Notice, the word of God bypassed all these powerful and “important” civic leaders. The Word of God flew right over their heads. It even bypassed important cities like Rome and Jerusalem and headed out into the wilderness. This Word of God headed to a guy not dressed in royal robes nor bearing any political title. It headed to John the Baptist dressed in rags. He had no political, social, or economic clout; he was just a voice of truth crying out in the wilderness, ***“Prepare the way of the Lord...prepare your hearts...for soon you shall see the salvation of God.”***

John the Baptist is not the Good News, but he is the carrier of Good News. He tells us clearly that he is not the Lamb of God, but that the Lamb of God is in our midst. He points us in the direction of Jesus. John the Baptist wasn't the wise, dying rabbi; he was the student, the messenger. The author of the Book of Baruch was not Baruch himself; he was an anonymous writer who made sure the good news of Baruch's message reached the hearts of the suffering. Much of the Book of Isaiah wasn't written by Isaiah but by some unknown author who knew God's message of hope just had to reach humankind.

It seems to be the way of God, that important civic and religious figures are not God's automatic nor favorite landing pads. God goes, instead, to those who are righteous, to those who try to do the right things day in and day out. This Word of God goes to those who have learned to block out the clamour of the city and hear the voice speaking in the silence of the wilderness, the silence of their hearts.

Take a moment and call to mind a prophet man, woman or child who prepared the way for God to enter your life.

Fr. Phil