

**Homily for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent - Cycle C  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield, Illinois  
December 8, 2024**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent, a season of preparation. While many people would assume this preparation means preparing for Christmas, the truth is that the focus on Jesus' birth becomes predominant only in the season's last nine days, December 16-24. That is when the Gospels specifically center on the historical birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The first part of Advent, however, is not focused on Jesus' first coming in Bethlehem, but on His second coming at the end of time. In that sense, it continues the focus on the end times that the Mass readings highlighted during the last weeks of Ordinary Time. The Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time and the First Sunday of Advent always have a judgment theme, either the Lord's return at the end of time, which we hear about in Ordinary Time, or the need for watchfulness and sober readiness for that coming, which we read in the scriptures at the beginning of Advent. The Solemnity of Christ the King hinges them together: Jesus is King of the Universe.

Thus, we need to be preparing not for a past event, but a future one. That is why, at every Mass, after the Our Father, the priest prays that the Lord will deliver us from every evil and keep us “free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

The theme running through today’s readings is that of joy, the joy we find in God’s redeeming love, and the joy we are called to share in the community of His Church.

We may not have given this much thought, but most of us use the word joy very carefully. Its synonyms such as happiness or gladness come more readily to our lips, while we tend to reserve the word joy for more special descriptions. It is as though we save it to express something deeper and less transitory than happiness or gladness. We can use it to express a state of mind brought about by our own achievements, but they must be special, such as giving birth or an unexpected but delightful meeting with those we love. More usually we reserve its use for occasions when we want to express being in touch with something that is greater than ourselves. This can be a religious experience, but also our reaction to encounters with nature, the arts or music, or those special moments of being with others.

In our second reading today (Phil 1:4-6, 8-11), St Paul's Letter to the Philippians immediately picks up on the theme of joy. He says that whenever he prays for his listeners he prays with joy because he remembers how open they have been to the message he preached to them and how eager they have been to spread the Good News. His prayer for them now is that their love for each other may increase more and more so that they will eventually reach the stage of perfect goodness. In both the Gospel and the first reading the image of this new state of joy is conveyed through the image of the flattening of the mountains and the filling in of the valleys. St John the Baptist, in preparing the way for the coming of Jesus, proclaims that nothing can stand in His way. His powerful presence can overcome all obstacles.

St. Luke sees salvation history as consisting of three periods: that of Israel (Old Testament), Christ (Gospel of Luke), and the Church (Acts of the Apostles). John the Baptist, the last prophet of the first period, prepares people for the time of Christ, the second period—thus the traditional understanding that John the Baptist's call is to prepare the way of the Lord. Today's Gospel (Lk 3:1-6) sets the stage for John to carry out his prophetic call.

Luke begins his narrative of the call of John the Baptist by providing a list of local political leaders. He also includes a few religious leaders who were, in fact, more political than religious. Luke wants to emphasize that God's plan was unfolding right in the midst of everyday secular life. The secular world did not understand that one age was coming to an end and a new age was emerging.

John received his call in the desert, where he was preparing for his prophetic call. John's ministry consisted of proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This baptism emphasized the need to take seriously the coming of a new age through moral preparation and cleansing.

John the Baptist is a voice crying out in the wilderness. There are images here of a new exodus that will prepare the way for the advent of Jesus and the new age. This prophetic message is meant for all people. John the Baptist is also a model for the Church, which must also urge people to be prepared for the way of the Lord. Just as John was the prophet of the new age, so must the Church take up that same message.

The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America speaks of the right to the pursuit of happiness. Saint Paul suggests that we find happiness and joy through the pursuit of goodness. As we grow in our love for each other and our love for our world we find joy coming into our lives as it gradually becomes the bedrock of our existence. Some people seem to have a more natural predisposition to joyfulness than others. They automatically make choices for the good that others have not even recognized as a choice. If we are not so naturally inclined, how do we cultivate an openness to joy? It is partly a matter of getting rid of the attitudes that block such openness, for example, being judgmental, negative thinking, or constantly complaining about things. The more positive side is exploring what in life we find enlightening and uplifting, the moments we have been touched by joy and how we might increase our openness to such moments in the here and now.

The ultimate question is: what can we do to prepare ourselves to meet the Lord? We are attentive to His presence, looking for Him where He is to be found. We begin with where we are now: As Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst," so He is here among us today.

Jesus is present in the proclamation of his word, which is why we stand for the Gospel, acknowledging the presence of the Risen Lord. Jesus is present in the Eucharist, a truth we learn from the accounts of the Last Supper and His teaching that we heard earlier this year in the readings from chapter 6 of John's Gospel, where Jesus refers to Himself as the Bread of Life. We are attentive to Jesus present in those who are in desperate need, as Jesus taught that: "Insofar as you did this [i.e. offered help] to the least of my brothers, you did this to me." Moreover, we are attentive to the presence of Jesus when we address Him and listen to Him in prayer. Being attentive to the Lord, we will be prepared and able to stand with confidence before the Son of Man when He returns in glory – and when we are called from this life to the eternal life He has promised.

May God give us this grace. Amen.