

**The Sunday Missive – December 10, 2023**  
**The Second Sunday in Advent**

**Hymn 76 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry Vv. 1, 2, 4 & 5**

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh;  
Awake and hearken, for he brings glad tidings of the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every breast from sin;  
Make straight the way for God within,  
And let each heart prepare a home  
Where such a mighty guest may come.

To heal the sick stretch out thine hand, and bid the fallen sinner stand;  
Shine forth, and let thy light restore  
Earth's own true loveliness once more.

All praise, eternal Son, to thee, whose advent doth thy people free;  
Whom with the Father we adore and Holy Spirit evermore.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-n\\_iUv9NII](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-n_iUv9NII)

**Hymn 56**

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O come thou Lord of might, who to thy tribes on Sinai's height  
In ancient times didst give the law, in cloud and majesty and awe.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qclIZpnZPgo>

## The Collect of the Day

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

### Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

## Psalm 85

You have been gracious to your land, O Lord\* ***You have restored the good fortune of Jacob.***

You have forgiven the iniquity of your people\* ***And blotted out all their sins.***

I will listen to what the Lord God is saying\* ***For he is speaking peace to his faithful people.***

Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him\* ***And to those who turn their hearts to him.***

Mercy and truth have met together\* ***Righteousness and peace have kissed one another.***

Truth shall spring up from the earth\* ***And righteousness shall look down from heaven.***

Righteousness shall go before him\* ***And peace shall be a pathway for his feet.***

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQuSD\\_f7Hyw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQuSD_f7Hyw)

## 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements

will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

### **Hymn 65 Prepare the way O Zion**

Prepare the way, O Zion, your Christ is drawing near!  
Let every hill and valley a level way appear.  
Greet One who comes in glory, foretold in sacred story.

O blest is Christ who came in God's most holy name.

He brings God's rule, O Zion; he comes from heaven above.  
His rule is peace and freedom, and justice, truth, and love.  
Lift high your praise resounding, for grace and joy abounding.

Fling wide your gates, O Zion; your Savior's rule embrace,  
And tidings of salvation proclaim in every place.  
All lands will bow rejoicing, their adoration voicing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9Roh7tNU0g>

### **Mark 1:1-8**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt

around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

## **Highway to Heaven – Advent 2B**

Let’s start off on a lighter note: What is Salvation? The academic field pertaining to salvation is called Soteriology. I learned that in school. A good thing, too because the other day my dog Fulu asked me, “Hey Pop, when do we get to discuss Soteriology?” Of course there’s no way to fully impart the actual exchange. Fulu is a healing presence much of the time; the rest of the time he’s a very interesting and picturesque dog. Perhaps Salvation is a blend of those two: it is what brings us to an understanding that healing and beauty are the only rewards worthy of the name; the only true and lasting treasure to be obtained in this life. And thus, healing and beauty are the only rewards worth seeking.

People talk about Heaven: that it can wait, that there’s no beer, that it can help us; that it is rest. We have been praying to our Father – who for some reason is named Art – ever since Jesus taught us how. There are lots of differences among the opinions of lots of really smart people in the world of distinctions between Heaven and Salvation, theologically, soteriologically, hermeneutically... That’s another big one. It means analysis. Through all of it, the most interesting talk about Heaven and Salvation equate the two.

“She’s up in Heaven now...” means everything is good, and that she has been saved; her life has been completed. Maybe it wasn’t exceptional, maybe even tragic, but now complete. She is at peace, “in a better place.” The alternative we all know but never fling about anymore. This is because they finally got rid of the waiting room for Hell, Purgatory, and the place went out of business because there was no place to sit down, no orange chairs. Although, we do have an election coming up next year, and I hear they’re thinking of re-opening.

Nowadays, we say Heaven, or we don’t say anything about after-life. As with many products devoid of competition, Heaven’s power and celerity in the enterprise of salvation has been dampened;

compromised by its own success. In any business, without competition we start to believe our own prevarications. BS for short. Nowadays there's just a huge waiting line for Heaven, because everybody is in litigation. Nobody ever has to be fully accountable for what they do. Without Hell, everything's always on appeal. "Float like a butterfly; sting like a bee" is the quintessential descriptor of a great boxer. But in our culture, we have adopted that as an ethical frame of reference; we cheat. No matter which political side you listen too, they're accusing the other side of cheating. Cheating, lying and stealing, manipulating. Nobody ever accused Muhammed Ali of cheating in the ring.

In the old days, when they realized the awful things you had done they'd say, "She's in Hell." Or not. But now, lots of us, lots of people are just blithely rewriting history, or listening to those who would 'reframe' it -- engage in "truth management" -- for selfish ends, and ignoring all that experience can teach. If we would learn from Rome, we would see to it that our Senate and our Circus were distinguishable from one another.

Today is traditionally known as Bible Sunday. One thing you have to love about the Church is that we are determined to find something special in every day. Yes, every day is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, but likewise, as our champion feeder-of-the-hungry here, Nancy would say, "Every day is Thanksgiving." So, Bible Sunday is on the calendar. If you don't have a Bible at home, please take the one from the pew rack in front of you, write your name in it and take it with you.

No excuses now. Isaiah is really three books: first, second and third. The first is much, much gloomier; giving circumstances around the exile of the Hebrews to Babylon. The third we're not going to talk about -- today. But the second begins at the 40<sup>th</sup> Chapter and describes what will happen after the exile ends. Written during the exile, it concerns what happens next. It is a beautiful projection. As such it serves as a telling example of the same kind of narrative arc of Jesus teachings -- Jesus, who was God's work of art -- who also yearned for his listeners to embrace what might be, what could happen next. Echoing the shape and grandeur of Babylonian celebrations -- at which his kinfolk had been selling kugel for 145 years -- Isaiah paints the

ideas that we will hear sung a dozen glorious times this month: “Comfort ye my people,” etc.

But there’s a hitch to getting in on the straight, flat highway celebration. We do have to pony up. There is one, seemingly simple criterion for making the good come about. The Psalmist declares, and we sing, “Surely salvation is at hand for those who fear God, that God’s glory may dwell in our land.” Then, and only then can steadfast love and faithfulness meet; then and only then can righteousness and peace come to a kiss.” Fear of God is of course just another word for accountability. Accountability for selfish intentions, for bad decisions, for lies, for crummy behavior, for uninformed voting, for manipulation, for pettiness and hatefulness and abandonment.

John Kenneth Galbraith wrote a small book – “The Scotch” -- published in 1961, about the town where he grew up in Canada. He describes how people mostly voted pretty much the way their forbears had done, unless there was a real reason not to. “They voted by heritage. Nor is it certain that any other system is tolerable. The most disturbing passages in Thucydides are those in which he tells how the Athenians were swayed *en masse* by orators. To this open-mindedness of theirs could be attributed their worst disasters. Democracy evidently needs the stabilizing influence of a very large number of people whose voting habits are predictable – who cannot be persuaded, for example, to abolish help for the poor, or to dismember the trade unions, release the rich from taxes, or countenance more environmental disasters in accordance with the urging of some especially talented spellbinder.” Galbraith wrote “the Scotch” over 50 years ago, and yet...

There’s lots of things we might vote differently on than our parents, oh yes. But the missing ingredient, the insufficient nutrient, the weak link in our diet, our government, our culture has been revealed as accountability.

Without calling for fire and brimstone (although last year’s fire season had us wondering) we must admit we are a malnourished and wandering society. We are very much in a wilderness, and in exile from a sense of purpose that includes justice, equality and peace. After what we have allowed to happen, are we able to bring about change? Noone can be sure. But we do have the responsibility to try.

Getting ready for the coming of Christmas is an endeavor to become more accountable. It is the eye-widening discipline of accepting this truth: salvation, that is heaven, means pursuit of love. We prepare, not by parroting the unexamined words of others, and not by adjusting our beliefs and behaviors to keep others from disliking us and consequently not buying whatever we're selling. Pursuit of love means taking to heart the truth that the only salvation lies in lives facing outwards, in service and engagement, with people, with polar bears, with the planet.

To prepare, we stop, whatever it is we're doing. Just stop. We acknowledge that we have not lived up to our best view of ourselves, and we invite whatever power there is in the Universe to transform us, and to make us part of a new Creation. We must ask, and we must rely on God's mercy, that is, the source of good that lies within all Creation.

The beloved Madeleine L'Engle writes: "We have much to be judged on when God comes, slums and battlefields and insane asylums, but these are the symptoms of our illness, and the result of our failures in love. In the evening of life we shall be judged on love, and not one of us is going to come off very well. And were it not for my absolute faith in the loving forgiveness of my Lord I could not call on God to come. Even so, come, Lord Jesus"

We implore you, good Jesus, that, as in your mercy you have given us to drink-in with delight the words of your knowledge, so of your lovingkindness you will also grant us one day to come to you, the fountain of all wisdom, and to stand forever before your face.

### **Hymn 67 Comfort, comfort ye my people**

Comfort, comfort ye my people, speak ye peace, thus saith our God;  
Comfort those who sit in darkness mourning neath their sorrows load.

Speak ye to Jerusalem of the peace that waits for them;  
Tell her that her sins I cover, and her warfare now is over.

Hark, the voice of one that cryeth in the desert far and near,  
Calling us to new repentance since the kingdom now is here.  
Oh, that warning cry obey! Now prepare for God a way;  
Let the valleys rise to meet him, and the hills bow down to greet him.

Make ye straight what long was crooked,  
Make the rougher places plain;  
Let your hearts be true and humble, as befits his holy reign.  
For the glory of the Lord now o'er earth is shed abroad;  
And all flesh shall see the token that the word is never broken.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGURM EVT8M>

### **Hymn 75 There's a voice in the wilderness crying**

There's a voice in the wilderness crying, a call from the ways untrod:  
Prepare in the desert a highway, a highway for our God!  
The valleys shall be exalted, the lofty hills brought low;  
Make straight all the crooked places where the Lord, our God, may go!

O Christians, you bring good tidings; get up to the heights and sing!  
Proclaim to a desolate people the coming of their King.  
Like the flow'rs of the field they perish; like grass our works decay.  
The pow'r and pomp of nations shall pass like a dream away.

But the Word of our God is eternal; the arm of our God is strong.  
He stands in the midst of the nations, and he shall right the wrong.  
He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, the lambs shall gently hold,  
To pastures of peace shall lead them, and bring them to his fold.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA73oyWm5gg>

## The Lighted Window

In the winter dusk  
When the pavements were gleaming with rain,  
I walked thru a dingy street  
Hurried, harassed,  
Thinking of all my problems that never are solved.  
Suddenly out of the mist, a flaring gas-jet  
Shone from a huddled shop.  
I saw thru the bleary window  
A mass of playthings:  
False-faces hung on strings,  
Valentines, paper and tinsel,  
Tops of scarlet and green,  
Candy, marbles, jacks—  
A confusion of color  
Pathetically gaudy and cheap.  
All of my childhood  
Rushed back.  
Once more these things were treasures  
Wildly desired.  
With covetous eyes I looked again at the marbles,  
The precious agates, the pee-wees, the chinies—  
Then I passed on.

In the winter dusk,  
The pavements were gleaming with rain;  
There in the lighted window  
I left my childhood.

Sara Teasdale