

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (2024 - C)

Since the beginning of Advent, we have all been preparing to celebrate the great and majestic feast of Christmas. We have all been busy shopping and baking and cleaning and decorating.

Here at Church, our musicians have been practicing carols, and soon, we will decorate the Church. We are almost ready to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In a few days, we will honor our newborn king as He deserves.

During Advent, the Church has been preparing us for Christmas with prayers and readings about the Lord's coming. We have heard prophecies from the Old Testament urging us to get ready. We have heard Saint John the Baptist quoting Isaiah telling us to make straight the way of the Lord.

It's now time for us to concentrate more intently on what we have been preparing for over the past three weeks. Now is the time to let the peace and silence of this holy season envelop you. If you are going to listen to something, put on some Christmas carols or hymns, and let them play softly in the background.

Take out your Bible and review again the prophecies about the promised Messiah. Imagine yourself among the Israelites awaiting the Messiah. Think about the many prophecies you would have heard concerning the Messiah and His coming. The Israelites searched the Scriptures from beginning to end for information about him, and they found many passages that made the Messiah's identity more plain. Spend some time reviewing those passages. Here are some:

If you were an Israelite, you would have known that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah. Judah was the fourth son of Jacob and Leah and the great-grandson of Abraham. You would know this because in the Book of Genesis (49:8, 10) it says:

“You Judah shall your brothers praise – your hand on the neck of your enemies; the sons of your father shall bow down to you ... The scepter shall never depart from Judah, or the mace from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and he receives the people's obedience.”

You would also be aware of another prophecy in the Second Book of Samuel (7:11-14). This prophecy concerned King David. Now David was the youngest son of Jesse, and Jesse lived in Bethlehem. Furthermore, Jesse was of the tribe of Judah which meant that David was too. Here is what God directed the prophet Nathan say to King David:

“When your days have been completed ... I [the Lord] will raise up your offspring after you ... and will establish His kingdom ... and I will establish his royal throne forever.”

Making David's role in this even more clear, the Prophet Isaiah (11:1) proclaimed that:

“On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.”

Clearly, this too was a reference to the Messiah. Here Jesse, the father of David, is compared to a tree that is cut down, but that tree is not killed. From that stump would grow a new branch. We all know how this works when a tree is cut down. The roots are not dead, and they send up new shoots. So too, from Jesse would come a descendent who would be great.

One more prophecy is found in the Book of the Prophet Micah, and we just heard it in our First Reading. The Prophet said,

“You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.”

Let's put all of these prophecies together. If we had been Israelites living in those long-ago times, we would have known several things. First, we would have known that the Messiah would be of the tribe of Judah. Second, that He would be a descendent of King David whose father was Jesse, and third, we would have known that the Messiah would be born in David's royal city, the City of Bethlehem.

(By the way, all of this explains the carol, “Lo How a Rose Ere Blooming from Jesse's stem hath sprung,” and the verse from the hymn O Come, O Come Emmanuel, “O come Thou rod of Jesse's stem.” Jesus was a descendent of King David the Son of Jesse.)

(These things also explain the angel's greeting to the shepherds on the first Christmas, **“Behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy ... For today in the city of David a Savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.”**)

There is yet one more very important prophecy from Isaiah (7:13-14). We would be very familiar with this too if we had lived in that time long ago. Here it is:

“Listen, O house of David! ... the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name Him Emmanuel.”

This sign of things to come, that a virgin would conceive, would be an extraordinary event. In fact, it would be a miracle, and in his gospel, Saint Matthew confirms this miracle did indeed take place. Saint Matthew reports that a virgin did indeed conceive and bear a son, and her name was Mary, and her Son was the long-awaited Messiah, Emmanuel, a name which means God is with us.

During Advent, the Church has asked us to ponder all of these things and to think about what times were like before the coming of Christ. The Church has asked us to remember how much the world needed a Savior and how in our own day, that need has not diminished but in fact increased and grown. Most important of all, the Church reminds us through her prayers of how

much we ourselves need redemption, of how much we need God.

Obviously, we all live in the present; we don't live in the past. We don't live in those times before the coming of Christ. In point of fact, we have been baptized into Christ Jesus, and by virtue of our baptism, we have become members of His body.

However, we still need this season of Advent to remind us, to bring home that point. We need Advent to help us realize what the world would be like if God were not with us; if we were still in the darkness of our sins; if we were still waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

Today, many people have lost their way. Many more don't know what life is all about. They don't know why they are here on earth, and they certainly don't know why we Catholic Christians celebrate Christmas.

Because these people have lost their way, they have no eternal goals. They only live from day to day. They only live for the moment. They don't know that God made them to live with Him in heaven, and so, they are not working to get to heaven. They are in great need of redemption. They need our help.

So in this coming year, I urge you to reach out to these people, to the unchurched and to those who have stopped practicing their faith. Seek opportunities to talk to them about God. Invite them to come with you to Mass. Encourage them to pray and to seek out the Lord Jesus who is the Savior of all mankind. Take them to the Prince of Peace.

In our holy Gospel today, we hear of how Mary set out and proceeded in haste into the Hill Country of Judah to be with her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Our Blessed Lady had heard good news. Elizabeth had conceived in her old age, and Mary went to rejoice with her and to help her.

However, Mary also brought something far more than just her presence to Elizabeth. She brought her the Christ Child, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out "**Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!**"

Mary has also brought great joy to us because she has given to us her Son, Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah and Savior of the world.

In this coming year, share that truth. Don't keep it to yourself. Our faith is not a private matter. If it were, no one would have ever heard about it. The Apostles shared the faith with anyone who would listen, and we should do the same. In this coming year, let's be like the Apostles and like the Blessed Virgin Mary who brought our Lord Jesus Christ to those who lived in darkness.

This Advent Season has been a time of preparation for us. Very soon, we will celebrate once again the coming of the Lord. We will rejoice in the great feast of Christmas, and we will do so together with all good Christian Men. We will come with all the Faithful, and rejoice with the Angels because "**A Child is born to us, a son is given to us ... they name Him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever and Prince of Peace (Is 9:6).**" Amen.