

2nd Sunday of Advent

Extra! Extra! Read all about it!

We have all seen in the movies...a young boy trying to sell newspapers—
trying to catch the attention of those walking by shouting,
“Extra, extra read all about it.”

Nowadays when communication is almost instantaneous
and people have email, youtube and twitter--news can spread very quickly.
In olden days, when the newspaper was the chief form of news,
it was usually sold in the morning.

However, if something very special happened after the paper was printed,
something so important it could not wait until the next morning,
the newspaper company printed a second newspaper that day—an extra,
and everyone who was selling newspapers would shout out
“Extra, extra, read all about it.”

When you heard those words, “Extra, extra, read all about it.”
You would probably stop and buy a paper,
even if you didn’t normally buy a paper,
because you would want to know what was so important
that the newspaper company would decide to print a second newspaper that day.

This is what was happening in the first reading, but it has to be put into its proper context.
For years Isaiah had been standing on a street corner crying out.
“You’re all a bunch of sinners,
and if you don’t shape up something terrible is going to happen.”

The people, who had been welded into a strong nation under king David,
had become very passive about their faith.
False gods had crept into their society and people were no longer devout.
Unfortunately the people did not listen to Isaiah’s words, and something terrible did happen.
Israel was invaded by Babylon and the people were taken as captives.

Then for years, while in captivity Isaiah did not let up his condemnation...
I told you...I told you that if you did not shape up, something terrible would happen,
and something terrible did happen.
Foreign armies invaded our land,
they destroyed our temple and they took us captives.

You can imagine that when the people heard this second message,
it would be like salt being rubbed into their wounds.
For years while in captivity Isaiah continued to harp on his people.

But one day the message changed.
One day instead of standing on a street corner shouting
“You’re all a bunch of sinners”...
Isaiah was shouting out...Extra, extra read all about it
God is going to comfort his people.

His message had changed ...from that of condemnation to that of comfort..

These are the words we hear in the first reading.
“Comfort, O comfort my people.”

Now if you were a Jew and you had been listening to Isaiah go on and on about your sinfulness,
and now all of the sudden he was proclaiming a message of comfort and mercy...
well you would sit up and take notice.

Gone were the harsh words of condemnation.
Now there were only the soft words of consolation.
Comfort, comfort my people,
Speak tenderly to my people,
they have suffered enough, it is time to go home.

When the people heard this message from Isaiah,
they knew that their exile, their enslavement, was coming to an end.
They knew that they would no longer be condemned for their past actions.
They knew that God’s mercy was going to shine through.

In time this comforting message of Isaiah would come to pass.
Cyrus, the leader of the Babylonians decreed that all slaves be permitted to return home.
You can imagine how the people must have danced for joy when they heard this news.

Now fast forward a few hundred years. The people had returned to Israel.
They had rebuilt their temple,
and they had returned into right relationship with God.
However, what usually happens to people who are placid,
is that they become very passive.
Rather than being excited about their faith, they became lukewarm.

It is in this atmosphere of passivity that John the Baptist comes on the scene.
He is shouting out, “Extra, extra, read all about it—
the Messiah, the long awaited one is coming.”

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness proclaiming a message of repentance.
It is his role to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah,
They would need to prepare the physical world for his coming—
this would be done by fixing all the roads, so travel would be easier.
And they would need to prepare spiritually for his coming.
And they did this by repenting of their sins
and being baptized as a sign of their repentance.

Now I need to make a footnote for a moment.
Once in a while I hear a small child come into church,
and see me dressed in my alb and chasuble, and say, “Hi God.”
They know they are going to the church to see God,
and because I am dressed differently, they just naturally assume that I am God.
I have to correct them...I am not God.

Well the same thing happens to prophets and especially John the Baptist.

He is in the middle of nowhere.
Preaching a message of repentance,
dressed in unusually clothing,
and eating a most bazaar diet.

Naturally the people mistake him for the Messiah.

But he is quick to point out that he is not the Messiah,
indeed he is not even fit to undue the thong of the sandal of the true Messiah.

In psychological language we would say that people were confusing the Medium with the Message.
They were confusing John the Baptist with being the Messiah.

But back to the Gospel. John the Baptist is successful in Baptizing many people .

We are told that people from the whole Judean countryside,
and ALL the people of Jerusalem were coming out to see him.

Just as all the people eventually listened to Isaiah,
All the people eventually listened to John the Baptist.

Now fast forward 2000 years.

Priests all over the world are standing at their pulpits shouting ou,
“Extra, extra, read all about it.” The Messiah is coming.”

The Church has given us this season of Advent to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

To prepare to celebrate his coming 2000 years ago,
and to prepare for his second coming sometime in the future.

And the ball is now in our court.

Do we, like the people in the first half of Isaiah’s life,
ignore the message to shape up or something terrible will happen.

Or do we, like the people in John the Baptist’s time--allow ourselves to undergo repentance.

Although the message has not changed, our role in God’s plan of salvation has changed.

No longer are we called to be passive responders to his message.

I say this because sometimes it is hard to determine whether someone believes or not.

The response to “The Lord be with you...is not a mumbled, “And with your spirit.”
It is “And with your spirit!”

The response to “Through him with him, and in him, O God almighty Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honor is yours forever, and ever”...is not Amen.

Spoken like it is a chore, not a joy.

Rather it is Amen...spoken with all the joy we can muster.

We are not making this advent journey as individuals,
we are making this journey as a community.

And so we have a onus to proclaim to those who are not hearing the message,
Extra, extra, read all about it...the Messiah is coming...prepare his way.