

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
December 1, 2019 – First Sunday of Advent
Matthew 24:36-44

When I was a youngster, I was beset with two giant fears. One related to what I had learned in my religion class. It was about "the end of the world." Jesus as judge would come atop the clouds and pronounce a judgment on each one of us. Including me! That was scary enough for this eight-year-old. Second, like many others, I feared an attack by our primary enemy of that time, Communist Russia. I had even set up a small bomb shelter in the basement of our family home. These two possible events lived deep within me and if I thought about them, I was one scared little boy.

Today's gospel reminds me of those early fears, although I now see things differently. As I hear about the coming of "the Son of Man" - a reference originally to the coming of the Messiah - I know that the Messiah has already come and remains with us to this day. As the gospel puts it in another place, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." It has already begun with the coming of Christ. To use current language, "It's now operational." So, in hearing that important message in the gospel for today, we are to "stay awake" to the presence of God in our lives right now. No matter how busy we are, God is there, right next to us or within us, as our creator, support and friend.

But to be aware of this miracle is far from easy. There are so many other things to think about than the presence of God's Spirit among us. It's hard to remain aware that all the good that we do, however small, contributes our share to the New Creation.

After all, there's all that's happening these days in the world of politics and economics. There's our favorite sports teams to follow. Christmas is coming. We need to "shop 'til we drop." And all those decorations waiting our attention. And not least, there are often serious health concerns involving both ourselves, and those we love. And there never seems enough money. We can easily be filled with many worries and concerns. And fears.

In other words, we are perfect candidates who should listen to today's gospel invitation, "Stay awake." Be aware that we are in God's hands and under God's care. We are loved no matter what. If we stray from God's path, God's mercy will bring us back on track. We are invited to trust God more than Wall Street or Pennsylvania Avenue. We are called to be persons of peace rather than harried shoppers filled with the worries of the season. It's called "the Advent season" which means that the God who loves each of us very much not only promised to come and be with us but has already done so. What's needed is our awareness and gratitude for God's faithful promise to be with us.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
December 8, 2019 – Second Sunday of Advent
Matthew 3:1-12

There are two major actors in the gospels. One, of course, is Jesus. And the other one is John the Baptist. One points more to the present and the future. That would be Jesus. The other, John the Baptist, calls attention to the past. Both are important in God's Plan. Both help us to understand ourselves.

John's message was one of repentance. His basic message was that we are all sinners. (No need to go into detail here. We each know the ways that we have failed to do what was right.) And we need to express sorrow for our past failings, especially to God who created us to do what is good. We might call what John was about Act One.

One way to admit to sinfulness and symbolically express this is by being washed by the water. John set up shop next to the Jordan River, a primary source of water back then. His baptism, a kind of washing in the river, didn't take away one's sins. Only God could do that. But admitting our guilt allowed God's forgiveness to take hold and truly be a part of us. But more was needed.

Now comes Jesus who would become (and remains) the true creator of new life in us. (Act Two) The baptism brought by Jesus would bring God's Spirit into each of us. And that created a kind of life that would continue to be ours forever and ever because it was God's very life that was given to us. This transformation or elevation would be described as our participation in God's life. Later theologians would state this in a powerful way: God became human (in Jesus) so that humans would become divine.

To understand this a little more, the baptism of Jesus was described as being connected with fire. Much can be said about the symbolism of fire. We know that the fire of the sun is necessary for there to be life on earth. Back in the days of Jesus fire had a marked practical meaning. It warmed people when it was cold and provided light when it was dark. It allowed nourishment through the cooking of meat and the baking of bread. In other words, fire supported and sustained life.

So, once we are freed from the presence of evil through repentance (the first act), the fullness of God's intent for us could take place through the coming of Jesus (the second act.) Each Advent season we are reminding of this divine/human drama. Except it's not just a play on a stage. It's real. It's part of us right now. Just in case we forget.

David M Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
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December 15, 2019 – Third Sunday of Advent
Matthew 11:2-12

Before Jesus there was John the Baptist. Reading between the lines of today's gospel we can surmise that those who made their way to the Jordan River for John's baptism were many. And their baptism was not just a "pass through and move on" experience. They joined John as his followers. And further, they must have been organized enough to make their way into Matthew's gospel by simply being referred to as "the disciples of John."

We should add then when Jesus eventually begins his public life, he did not enter an empty stage. There were many organized religious groups in Israel. Some were called zealots who were organized almost as para-military units preparing for the final "battle" between the forces of good and the forces of evil. While not mentioned in the New Testament, we have learned through archaeological research of a sizable monastic group called the Essenes. They were the ones who created the famous Dead Sea Scrolls. And there were the followers of John the Baptist. All these groups had their members and most important here, their leaders. John was one of them.

Religious leadership can easily bring forth questions about its value and authenticity. So, it would not be surprising that John the Baptist, who was well-known in religious circles, caused some to wonder about whether he was the Messiah. His prophetic message of repentance and renewal fit well into the expectations of some who hoped and prayed that God would send ("messiah" means "one sent") one who would restore Israel and Judaism to its earlier greatness.

As when Jesus entered the religious world of that time, it should be of no surprise that the opinion of John the Baptist would be sought about this new fellow who also brought a message thought by some to be from God. Is Jesus to be listened to? Are you and Jesus some kind of religious team? John's response is clear. He is of less importance than Jesus. Jesus alone is the one you should listen to. So John, as we say today, stepped aside.

What is the truth we should listen to? It's simple and complicated at the same time. Jesus is to be first in our lives. His teachings and example are primary. If there are other religious leaders, their views must be in line with those of Jesus. Their interpretations of God's truth must always be measured against those of Jesus. This was true in the time of John the Baptist and remain so today. That's why we are called Christians.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
December 22, 2019 – Fourth Sunday of Advent
Matthew 1:18-24

Let's briefly turn our attention to St. Joseph. While we might not think of him as a major player in God's Plan for our salvation, we would do well to reconsider his role. The gospel for today, right before Christmas, describes what happened as God's preparation for that monumental day. And interestingly, Joseph is featured.

Joseph had been betrothed to Mary. Betrothal was much more important back then than engagement is today. According to the Jewish law and custom of the time, when he learned that Mary was pregnant and knowing that he was not the father, it was his religious duty to divorce her. The gospel implies that he decided to do exactly that and that out of love and respect for Mary, he would do so "quietly." Think about this. If he did this, something his religion required, we are left to wonder what would happen from then on.

But we know that he stayed with her and eventually (probably quite quickly) married her. Let's think about what caused him to make this unconventional response to the situation. Did he simply change his mind? Was he pressured by his family or close friends whom he might have confided in?

Well, Matthew gives us the answer. Joseph came to realize that it was God's will that he wed Mary. And he learned this through a dream. We are told by biblical scholars that it might now have been a dream during the night as we typically think of these matters. Or he might have simply discerned through prayer and meditation what was best for him to do. Or to put it another way, what Joseph believed that God desired him to do, to make a decision that can easily be thought of by us as the most difficult decision of his life!

I think this gospel illustrates one of many ways that you and I might be inspired by God to do this or that. Sometimes our decisions are simply based on rational calculation. This makes sense, so we do what is clear. Sometimes we think of doing what we call "the greater good." We place options side by side and chose the one that seems best. Sometimes we ask the advice of people we judge as wise and informed. Sometimes we "consult" our feelings. And like Joseph, sometimes we open ourselves to what God seems to be asking of us. Joseph "dreamed" what that was. Think back on your own life and ask yourselves how you made the important decisions of your life. You might be surprised in realizing that you made a major decision in ways similar to that of Joseph.

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December 29, 2019 – The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Matthew's account of the flight into Egypt by the Holy Family may sound like it's taken from today's news. It describes a family on the run, seeking asylum because their lives were in danger. They had to travel to a place of safety.

The urgency of their departure was highlighted by the fact that they had to leave at night. They would be traveling on their own across territory that would be unfamiliar to them. They were from the north. They were told to head south. It is about 500 miles from Jerusalem to Cairo. They walked all the way. It might have taken them weeks, if not months to make this perilous journey. Hardly any details are given about how difficult this was for the Holy Family. But we can easily imagine the challenges they faced each day. Not only were their lives in danger from bandits and wild animals, but they had to find safe places to sleep and food and drink. Most of their journey was across desert land. But they had no choice. Life and death were in the balance.

It's important that all of us think about the survival challenges faced by Joseph, Mary and Jesus, not only at this clearly dangerous time of their lives, but everyday thereafter. Some artists and storytellers have created what I would judge as an overly romantic, even sentimental view of their lives. Statues of Mary and Joseph often present them as peaceful and calm, devout and untroubled, not to mention that they look more northern European than Jews from the Middle East. The problem is that the more we sanitize their history, the less they appear to us a model of holiness and worthy of our imitation.

A careful reading of the gospels along with some historical background of their times helps us to form a more realistic picture of their lives. Think of the actual situation that we were given last Sunday over the question surrounding Mary's pregnancy. Recall the scene of the birth of Jesus in less than ideal circumstances. Then today we are told about the hasty and dangerous escape to save the life of Jesus and perhaps that of their whole family. We are then told that they had to stay away from their homeland, perhaps for years. Once they returned to Nazareth, Joseph had to work with his hands, day after day, to put food on the table for his family. Reliable tradition tells us that Joseph was the first to die, leaving Mary a widow. The gospel's silence about their day-to-day life in Nazareth suggests that it was not easy. Nor was anyone's life back then under similar circumstances.

So, when we think about their holiness and trials, be assured that they had it no better than most of us. In fact, at times they had to struggle and face fear. Just like us.

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