

2nd Sunday of Advent
Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
December 6, 2020

HOPE! Advent is a season of hope. Advent is a time of preparation for Christ's three comings:

- His second coming at the end of time, of which we heard in last week's readings
- The annual commemoration of the birth of the infant Jesus at Christmas and
- His coming into our daily lives, in the most ordinary of circumstances.

Advent is also a time of year when one of my favorite compositions, George Frideric Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, one of the best-known and most frequently performed choral works, is traditionally performed before packed music halls; but not this year, due to the Corona virus pandemic. And that's a shame because *Messiah*, just like Advent, is about **hope**, and **hope** is something we all sorely need right now. In fact, the opening choral scenes from *Messiah* are taken from the 40th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, which is our first reading today.

Isaiah presents a message of **hope** to the Israelites in Babylonian exile. The Lord promises to "give comfort," to give **hope**, to the Israelite people. Their servitude and exile, for sinning and turning away from God, is at an end; their sins are forgiven; their "guilt is expiated." The Lord promises to prepare the way, make it easier, for the exiles; shepherding their return to the promised land by:

- Filling in valleys
- Leveling mountains, and
- Making the rugged land smooth.

In today's gospel reading from Mark, that imagery of preparing "the way of the Lord" is applied to the Old Testament prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. Furthermore, John the Baptist is identified as the messenger who is "prepar[ing] the way of the Lord, mak[ing] straight his paths." Through his "baptism for the repentance of sins," John is foretelling the coming of the Messiah, "one mightier," who will baptize not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit. John is giving the people **hope**!

The preaching of repentance by John the Baptist is also appropriate for us today. Repentance is part of the very foundation of our Christian faith and without it, we have no **hope**. Unless we recognize the need for repentance, it isn't possible for God to give us the wholeness of life that he wants for us. Yet, repentance tends to be viewed in a negative light these days because it's generally associated with our faults, our sins. However, repentance literally means "to change our mind, our heart," to turn around, express regret and transform our heart, our attitude and our behavior. To repent is to recognize that without the Lord we are lost in an egocentric world. The transformation begun with repentance leads us to ask God for forgiveness and enables us to turn toward God, allowing the Holy Spirit to enter more deeply into our lives.

During Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas, to welcome Christ's power in our daily lives, and to look forward to his second coming, John the Baptist invites us to **hope** by casting off all vestige of estrangement, self-centeredness, ego and pride, turning to God with humility seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.

I know what you may be thinking: No! I didn't intend for this homily to be a shameless plug for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but for your information, Reconciliation is available here at the Cathedral before the Masses on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

By the way, if, in years past, you've enjoyed the Advent tradition of listening to a performance of the *Messiah* and would like to experience it this year, consider going to YouTube and search for "Self-Isolation Choir presents: Messiah at Home." Over 3,900 musicians and choral singers from around the world, self-quarantined during the pandemic, individually recorded the complete 2 hour, 15 minute oratorio. Sound and video engineers and editors melded all of these individual performances together resulting in an impressive concert that will give you **hope** as we approach the end of 2020.