

Through Another Lens

Reflections on the Gospels

YEAR C

Barbara Jean Franklin, ASC



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Advent

First Sunday of Advent

Luke 21:25–28, 34–36

✚ Today our hearts move into a new Church year from quiet remembrance of loved ones who have completed their earthly journey. But our own journey is incomplete. What do we want to accomplish by Christmas, by the feast of Christ the King at the end of this new liturgical year?

In today's reading, Luke gives us a vision of cosmic disasters and the coming of the Son of Man. We are told to "be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." Our quiet remembrance is replaced by a startled awakening.

The Church invites us to take a good look at our current state of affairs, both individually and collectively. There's no room for passive bystanders here. Each time we read this passage on the First Sunday of Advent, we automatically insert the names of places and people currently challenged as a result of "distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

Sobering though it may be, this is where we seekers need to begin. We find evidence of the reign of God in our midst; at the same time, we know God's reign is very much "not yet." Our search for God's reign takes us not only outside ourselves, but also into our own hearts.

The following “Fragments of a Lost Gospel” remind us how far we’ve strayed from the Gospel of Jesus and challenge us to look with care and persistence as we strive to recover the spirit of that Gospel:

The key of knowledge ye hid: ye yourselves entered not in, and to them that would enter in ye opened not.

Let him that seeketh cease not till he find. When he finds he shall be astonished: astonished he shall reach the kingdom: and having reached the kingdom he shall rest.

The kingdom of heaven is within you: and whosoever knoweth himself shall find it.

Raise the stone and thou shalt find me. Cleave the wood and I am there.¹

On this first Sunday of Advent, the Church invites us to reflect on the current state of our world and of our own hearts. We *consciously* seek the means to make the reign of God more present among us. For us, that’s not just an unrealistic ideal: We proclaim it as a present and future reality as we pray for each other that, as we journey to the Second Coming of Jesus, we will not cease being seekers. We hope that during this time of Advent we find ourselves actually astonished at the many ways the reign of God is within each of us. Should we find it lacking, we have the poet’s assurance: “Raise the stone and thou shalt find me. Cleave the wood and I am there.” More important, we have Jesus’ words: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-6

✚ Each year on this Sunday we hear the call of John the Baptist: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Because Scripture is the living Word of God, our understanding of what that call means to us grows and changes as our lives take different twists and turns along the way. If we listen carefully each time we hear the words of the Baptist, we hear a call we’ve never heard before. As past, present, and future come together in John the Baptist’s call in this particular year of the Lord, Luke’s account gives us a sense of place within God’s promise of salvation.

We usually focus on the words of Isaiah the prophet, which John applies to himself and adapts to the people of his time. Luke puts Isaiah’s words in the context of the political and religious reality of John’s time: “In the fifteenth year....” This historical rootedness is important, but the sense of *place* is equally important. God’s Word comes to John not through the mouths of the political or religious leaders Luke lists, nor through the voices of the local town criers who bring the leaders’ messages to the people on the street corners of the towns of Judea or Galilee. Rather, God’s Word comes to John in the wilderness, that place of exile where the Israelites encountered a God who journeyed with them.

Those who hear John’s cry can recall their past and understand his urgency to return to covenant faithfulness. They know God’s saving action in the lives of their people, and they’re encouraged by the promise that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” We need to remember our own salvation history and place our hope in the promise of Isaiah and John still alive in our time. For 2000 years, John’s sense of urgency has sustained: the call is the same today as it was then.

John issued his call from the wilderness at a place apart from the usual centers of power. Our wilderness call is as personal as that of John’s. As we remember the twists and turns of our journey with God and place our hope in the future we ask, where is that empty wilderness from which we hear God’s call in this year of the Lord?

Today’s Scripture passage invites us to let the echoes of John’s

message reverberate through our minds and hearts from places we perhaps dare not go.

Reflect on these words of Sister Maris Stella:

I did not cut myself this hollow reed,
I did not seek it in the shallows growing.
In all my life I paid but little heed
To burnished reeds in the bright shallows blowing.
And this that now is thrust into my hand
Mysteriously cut and tuned for singing
Was gathered in a strange and distant land
And has immortal airs about it clinging.
An unseen piper tuned its ghostly note.
O who would dare to touch it—who would dare?
From out the fearful hollow of its throat
Such music pours as I am unaware
How to devise. I did not think these things.
It is the reed, it is the reed that sings.²

John the Baptist is crying to us from the wilderness to “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” As we remove the obstacles that stand in the way of our relationships with God and others, it’s good to remember we are instruments of God. No matter how sinful or broken any of us is, God keeps calling and has already built the highway that takes us back to God.

As we share Eucharist today, we become the Word and the Body and Blood of Christ, part of divine providence, part of the construction crew that smooths the way so “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” The task may seem daunting, so it’s important to remember “It is the reed, it is the reed that sings.”