

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Light two candles on your Advent wreath. Repeat short messages you have heard today—headlines, radio patter, family comments, workplace exchanges. Statements need not make sense together.

**LEADER:** Revive us, comforting God, as once you revived the people of Israel.

**ALL:** We live in your promise.

**LEADER:** May all humankind see your goodness in us.

**ALL:** We live in your promise.

**LEADER:** Forgive us as we forgive others; revive us as we give others life.

**ALL:** We live in your promise.

**LEADER:** Justice walks before our God.

**ALL:** Wholeness follows in the footsteps of the Holy One.

“Tell me about the God you don’t believe in,” says scripture scholar Marcus Borg. The comment asks us to question the analogies we use to describe God. We can speak about God



# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

only by drawing on our human experience, yet no comparison is adequate.

Your God may still be a thundering, white-bearded, all-knowing autocrat whom you reject for letting bad things happen to good people and whom you suspect hasn’t kept up with the electronic age. Or, perhaps your God is the faithful, loving father to whom Jesus teaches us to pray.

Or, perhaps your God is the one who occasionally blesses you with a new job or parking place but lets you wallow alone in your shame and failures the rest of the time—an on again, off again God. Or maybe your God is just a texting exclamation—OMG.

What does the unfolding of the cosmos in evolution tell us about God? God unfurls dynamic energy that forms increasingly complex relationships, that ultimately forms the awesome



cosmos we know as diverse and yet one. This God is creative and present from beginning to end. The Spirit of God reaches through all that is. We humans are Earth’s conscious cantors.

Advent prepares us to celebrate the incarnation—God becoming one of us. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, the one Israel’s prophet

Isaiah promised God would send. By loving us as one of us, Jesus shows us that our capacity to love is the image of our life-giving, creative God in us.

As we celebrate Christmas, love evolves in our relationships, in our world. We carol and spread joy. We light up the dark. We gift one another and set tables for family and stranger. We live in the embrace of God. Creation is holy. Our family relationships are holy. Our lives of love and struggle are holy.

● Tell about the God you believe in today.

# GOSPEL

## John the Baptist is a herald's voice.



**NARRATOR 1:** Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Isaiah the prophet, it is written:

**ISAIAH:** I send my messenger before you to prepare your way: a herald's voice in the desert, crying, "Make ready the way for God's coming; clear God a straight path."

**NARRATOR 2:** Thus John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance which led to the forgiveness of sins.

**NARRATOR 1:** All the Judean countryside and the people of

Jerusalem went out to him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.

**NARRATOR 2:** John was clothed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. His food was grasshoppers and wild honey. He preached, saying:

**JOHN THE BAPTIST:** One more powerful than I will come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water; the one who is coming will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.

Mark 1.1-8

through the sea would make a way home through the wilderness.

By identifying John the Baptist with the Isaiah of the exile, Mark wants listeners to hear the Baptist as the herald of a new age of forgiveness and promise. God is faithfully present in Israel's history, making a way where there is no way—in the exodus a path for slaves to freedom, in the exile a road home for captives.

● What paths have opened for you in your life where you could see none?

**M**ark pictures John the Baptizer appearing in Elijah's old wilderness haunts and wearing similar garb. For those who know Israel's scriptures, Mark's description makes apparent that the Baptist fulfills the prophecy that Elijah, who was taken into the heavens in a fiery chariot, would return.

Mark introduces John with spare detail. John preaches a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Baptism refers to a washing that is part of a ritual of repentance. While priests washed before serving in the temple, purifying and cleansing themselves, Israel has no real precedent in its traditions for John's dramatic baptism.

To repent is to resolve to change, to mark a new beginning. Bathing refreshes and reinvigorates. It takes

## John the Baptist promises the Spirit.

**I**n this Sunday's gospel the Church hears the first eight verses of Mark's gospel, the first to be written. Mark begins his story of Jesus without elaborate fanfare. The author says nothing about himself and announces in a single verse the main claim of the new narrative: Jesus is the promised Christ (the messiah) and his story is gospel, that is, good news.

Mark includes no genealogies or birth stories, no accounts of dramatic portents in the heavens, but the first evangelist does carefully tie his gospel to the story of God's

people, Israel. For Mark, Jesus' story begins with an ancient prophecy that John the Baptist fulfills. The Baptist is a voice like the prophet Isaiah of the exile, a herald crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way for God's coming."

To the Israelites exiled in Babylon (587-540 B.C.), Isaiah preached God's comfort and forgiveness. The prophet saw in the victories of the Persians over the Babylonians the hand of God making a way home for them. The transcendent God who centuries earlier in the exodus made a dry path

away the sweat, dirt, and smell of past work and readies the bather for new company and activity. John uses bathing as a sign of people's turning toward God in response to his preaching.

Like Elijah the Baptist haunts the wilderness. Like Elijah who discovered God speaking not in storms and lightning but in silence, the Baptist in the silence of his wilderness life senses God is coming among the people in a new way. His preaching and baptizing bring people into the wilderness and ready them for this breakthrough. His baptism washes away a past of simply keeping and breaking the law and symbolizes openness to the reviving Spirit of God.

John promises one more powerful than he is coming. He envisions that this coming figure will also baptize but with the Holy Spirit. Baptism in the Holy Spirit will create people anew more wholly than water cleanses and reinvigorates.

● **What do you need to wash away to be open to God's reviving Spirit this Advent season?**

● **What do you find frustrating about preparing for Christmas? What might the Spirit be urging in you in these feelings?**

**S**ignificantly, John the Baptist's promise of one who baptizes with the Spirit is never fulfilled within the parameters of Mark's narrative. In Mark's gospel Jesus does not baptize but is instead baptized by John. John's promise of baptism in the Spirit hovers over the gospel narrative, the first of a series of promises that point beyond the ending of Mark's gospel.

These unfulfilled promises tell us something important about the gospels. The story of Jesus continues into the future.

Mark wants his audience to recognize we are part of the gospel story. This is the beginning of a story that has not ended—and will not until the "owner of the house" returns.

This story is for all people and all times. John's ministry is only a preliminary. He prepares the way for someone far



**Celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, who appeared to an Indian man, St. Juan Diego, in 1531 and promised to hear the prayers of his people. December 12 is her feast, December 9 is his.**

greater. But his role of preparing the way is important. John prepares the way for our hearing of the gospels this year. He points to all that lies ahead for us. The coming year holds open the promise of one who gives the gift of the Spirit—to revive and forgive, to heal and free.

● **In what Advent gatherings or events will you participate this year? How is God present in them?**

● **What relationships cry out for you to revive?**

**DO SOMETHING**

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- Explore alternative Christmas gifts. Parishes, schools, and Catholic Charities offices usually have lists of families that need Christmas gifts and food.
- Catholic Relief Service (CRS.org) offers many ways to serve the needs of people living in poverty or experiencing disaster or war.
- Heifer International (Heifer.org) trains farmers and provides animals to help families in developing countries and the U.S.





## What does God promise?

**W**here is God present? The answer was easy for people in ancient Israel—in the temple. For them God was a great warrior who with the armies of heaven helped them fight and win their battles, then marched to the sanctuary to dwell among the people and secure their home.

Israel lost more than a building in 587 B.C. when the Babylonians destroyed the temple that Solomon had built 400 years earlier. The people lost the center that held them together. God seemed to have abandoned them.

The winds of history might have swept away all traces of Israel as a people. Instead the captives in exile found God operating outside the box in Babylon, the land along the Euphrates called Iraq today.

There the priests gathered and wrote down Jewish history. We have it to this day in the Old Testament. People began to gather in synagogues to hear these writings and pray. In losing the temple, their fixed home for God, the people and prophets in exile discovered God's spirit afoot in their midst.

The prophet called Second Isaiah, who is speaking in chapters 40-55, sees God at work in the events of history, in the victories of Cyrus and his Persian armies over the Babylonians around 540 B.C. Cyrus is God's instrument to lead the captives home.

The people have nothing to fear and every reason to hope. Their God will accompany them home to their restoration. Israel's restoration will have a prophetic purpose. Zion will become a herald of God's good news to other nations, a witness of God's power to renew and restore.

### The Promise of Hope

**Comfort, O comfort to my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that she has served her term that her penalty is paid, that she has received from God's hand double for all her sins.**

**A voice cries out:**

**"In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low; the rugged land shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of God shall be revealed, and all humankind shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."**

**Get up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good tidings! Lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! See, God comes with might, the Lord God, who rules with a strong arm; reward is with God, recompense before the Lord. Like a shepherd God feeds the flock; God will gather the lambs, carrying them and leading the ewes with care.**

Isaiah 40.1-5,9-11

- What continuity do you hear between the voice of Isaiah and the voice of the gospel writers?
- How does God's promise of forgiveness and home speak to you this Advent?

## PRAY

Name people and concerns you have. To each, respond:

**ALL:** Open our hearts to your coming, O God, ever creative.

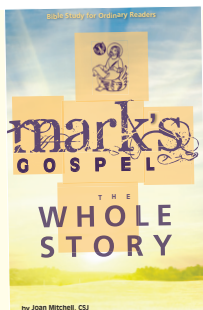
*Conclude your prayer:*

**LEADER:** Comfort us, your people, loving God.

**ALL:** Lift our eyes and hearts to see your coming.

**LEADER:** Gather us in your care, shepherd God.

**ALL:** Open our hearts to live the good news we hear. Amen.



88 pages, \$10.00

The Gospels we hear on Sundays this year will come primarily from the Gospel according to Mark. Sister Joan's book is for individuals and groups who want to discover how Mark weaves the stories of Jesus' earliest followers into a narrative of faith. The chapters are short, with plenty of reflection questions to choose from. Studying Mark is an ideal way to begin 2018.

Call 800-232-5533 or visit [goodgroundpress.com](http://goodgroundpress.com).

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