

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an Advent wreath at the center of your group. Light two candles for the second week of Advent.

LEADER: Faithful God, you led our ancestors to freedom through the sea.

ALL: You led them home from exile through the wilderness.

LEADER: You lived among your people in a tent and a temple.

ALL: Your Son became flesh and lived among us as one of us.

LEADER: We gather to hear the stories that tell us who we are.

ALL: Our community is home to your Spirit.

Places where we live accumulate memories—sweet breezes we are sure no one else ever felt, blue spruces growing taller in every season, backsteps where grandpa liked to talk. To our physical memories of home we attach our experience of family belonging.

“The entire material universe speaks of God’s love,” Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*. “The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on intensely personal meaning... For anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by a spring to drink, or played outdoors in a neighbourhood square, going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves” (#84).

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Jerusalem is home to God and home to God’s people in Israel’s history. David moves the Ark to this town. On its highest hill his son Solomon erects a temple for God to dwell among the people. Life in the shelter of its courts becomes a symbol of peace. Worship at its altars becomes an experience of belonging to God’s people.

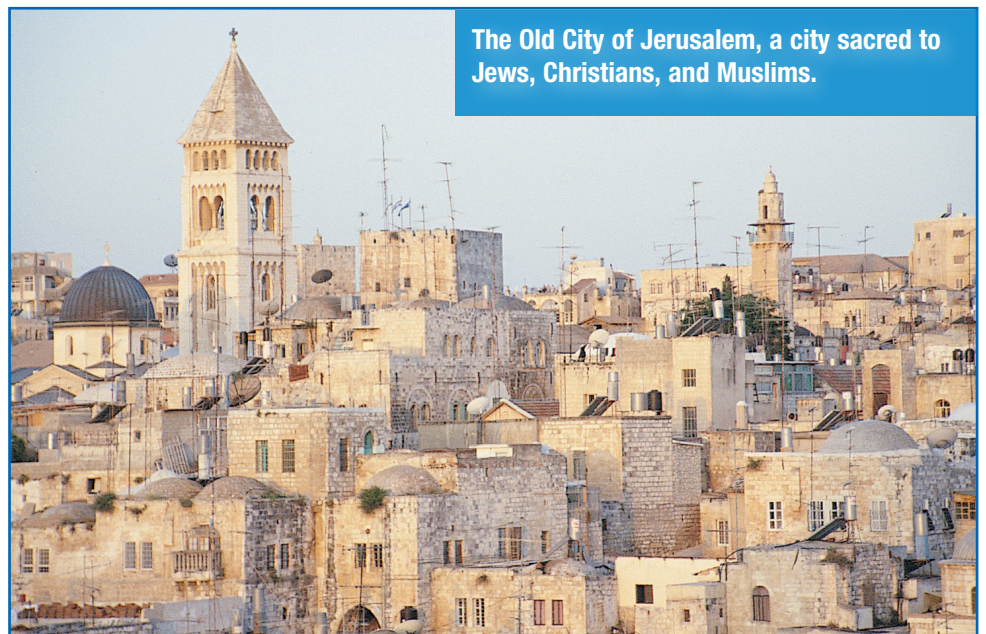
When the Babylonians defeat Israel in 587 B.C., they breach the city walls, burn and level its homes, tear down the temple, and carry the able-bodied into exile in Babylon.

Our Jewish ancestors in faith might have vanished as a people except for the scrapbookers of the exile—the priests who collected and wrote down their

history. After nearly 50 years in exile the people might have lost their religious identity without the prophet Second Isaiah who preached a new exodus, a way home through the wilderness.

Enough of the children and grandchildren of the exiles returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city, its walls, and temple. To new generations they passed on the history of God’s creative, faithful, liberating love that the priests had collected and written down, scripture we read to this day.

● What memories of home and parish do you hold? How is God part of them?



The Old City of Jerusalem, a city sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

GOSPEL

John the Baptist prepares Jesus' way



NARRATOR: In the 15th year of the rule of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea; Herod, the ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of the region around Ituraea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, the ruler of Abilene; when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests—the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. John went about the whole area around the Jordan River preaching.

JOHN: Turn away from your sins and be baptized. If you repent, God will forgive you.

NARRATOR: When people heard John, they remembered what was written in the book of the prophet Isaiah.

ISAIAH: A herald's voice in the desert cries out: "Make ready a road for God. Clear a straight path for God. Every valley shall be filled; every mountain and hill shall be leveled.

"The windings shall be made straight and rough ways smooth, and all humankind shall see the salvation of God."

Luke 3.1-6

of Second Isaiah and John the Baptist join in a single call to recognize ourselves and our communities as home to God. The God awake and afoot in Sunday's scripture readings is the One who makes a home among us in becoming flesh.

● In the ninth year of Francis I, the 266th pope of the Roman Catholic Church; in the fifth year of Antonio Guterres, the 9th Secretary General of the United Nations; in the first year of Joseph R. Biden, the 46th president of the United States, what word of God comes to you?

● In what special ways do you spend time together as a family in Advent?

John calls us to prepare a road for God's homecoming.

Luke carefully fixes the beginning of John the Baptist's preaching and Jesus' ministry in world time—the 15th year of Tiberius. Earlier in his gospel, Luke dates John's birth in the days of King Herod of Judea and Jesus' birth "in the days when Caesar Augustus published a census and Quirinius was governor of Syria." Luke places gospel events in Roman history for an audience that we can infer must include Gentiles.

However, Luke places John the Baptist not only in Roman, Gentile history. For Jewish ears he identifies an echo of Second Isaiah in the preaching of John. Second Isaiah is the prophet who promises God will lead the exiled people home on a straight road

through the wilderness, just as once God led their ancestors to freedom on a dry path through the sea.

In giving John the Baptist voice in the Advent gospels, the Church's lectionary takes liberty with historical time. John and Jesus are close in age; their mothers pregnant at the same time. But in Sunday's gospel the Baptist is already an adult whose prophetic preaching helps us prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus and the mystery of his continuing presence with us. John's first-century call to repentance calls to us to change our hearts and make a home for Jesus among us in our lives.

For Christians who hear the Advent readings today, the voices

The preaching of John the Baptist echoes Second Isaiah's call to exiled Israelites to come home and become a people again. God calls Second Isaiah to comfort and forgive the people in exile. "Comfort my people," God directs. "Speak tenderly to Israel and proclaim her guilt is expiated; she has received double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40.1-2).

Second Isaiah becomes a herald who announces God will lead the people home from exile. His prophetic poetry imagines God powerfully straightening hairpin turns, filling impassable crevasses, and smoothing exhausting terrain. Luke quotes this vision from Second Isaiah to explain John the Baptist's call to get a God-attentive attitude and prepare a road for God to come among us.

John the Baptist heralds the turning point in history by which much of our world marks its calendar. The God who dwelt in Israel's tent and temple and whom Second Isaiah discovered at work in Babylon finds a new dwelling place.

A woman makes home in her womb for God to become human. A human family makes a home in which her son, the Son of God, can grow up. God is at home in us and with us. The bishops of the Second Vatican Council beautifully describe the dignity of the human person in the light of God's becoming human in Jesus.

"For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #22).

● What does God becoming human mean to you?

● How does the fact that Jesus worked, thought, acted, and loved as you do affect the worth you see in your actions?

Ancient Israelites imagine God as a divine warrior with a heavenly army who helps the people triumph in battle and then marches before them, leading them to a place where they build a temple to worship their God and where they settle. This ancient imagery inspires Second Isaiah's vision of God leading the captives home to Jerusalem on a road smooth and straight through the wilderness.

A road is also a metaphor for the journey each of us makes in life. On our journeys we climb hills and walk shadowed valleys. We speed along straightaways but slow for curves where we can't see what is coming. Crossroads force us to decide which way we will go. On the road we meet fellow travelers,

coming from nearby or from places we have never been.

● What roads do you see in your mind when you remember the way home?

● How does the road you are currently traveling affect Earth?



God leads Israel home in joy.

Many Israelites in exile didn't want to come home. Like second- and third-generation immigrants whose lives and careers are in the U.S., the second- and third-generation exiles had made their lives and careers in Babylon, working at metal crafts or in the foreign service as translators.

When Cyrus, king of the Persian empire (modern Iran), begins to attack and slowly conquer the Babylonians around 545 B.C., Second Isaiah sees God acting through Cyrus to set the Israelites free to be a people again.

Second Isaiah imagines a new exodus for the people, a second journey to the promised land with God leading them home

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

● Visit Koinonia Farm in person or online to learn about its peacemaking work, its sustainable farming, and its Fund for Humanity that grew into Habitat for Humanity. Visit the online store for Christmas gifts and support their work for peace and reconciliation. Koinoniafarm.org

● Learn online what Hanukkah celebrates. Talk about the story at a meal. Pray together: Let us rejoice with our Jewish sisters and brothers, who light the eight candles of Hanukkah this week. We bless the light of Jewish faith in our world. Amen.

through the desert. The prophet creates a vision to motivate people to leave their careers and jobs to journey back to their ruined city and land. Few of these second- and third-generation Israelites had reason to set out for a land they had never seen.

The vision of preparing a road home for God belongs not just to Second Isaiah. This Sunday's first reading comes from Baruch, a book written in the 2nd or 3rd century B.C. Baruch uses the same imagery of the exiles' homecoming to call the people for whom he wrote to count on God.

Arise and rejoice, Jerusalem

Arise, Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of God's glory forever. Up, Jerusalem, stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that they are remembered by God.

For God has commanded that every lofty mountain be made low, and that the age-old depths and gorges be filled to level ground, that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God. The forests and every fragrant tree have overshadowed Israel at God's command; for God is leading Israel in joy by the light of God's own glory with mercy and justice for company.

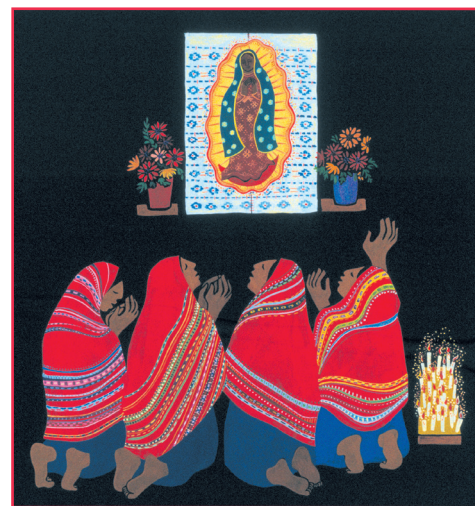
Baruch 5.1,5,7-9

God's homecoming is an announcement and a call. The prophetic voices of Second Isaiah, Baruch, and John the Baptist herald God's homecoming, announce God at work in the world. But their news is at the same time a call to repentance, to make room for God, to smooth, straighten, and level the way. God finds a home in Mary's yes to come among us. God must find a home in our faith and practice of justice and peace.

"Home is where one starts from," T. S. Eliot writes in his poem "East Coker," the second of his *Four Quartets*. In the last of the four poems, "Little Gidding," Eliot returns to the theme of home. *And the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time.*

- Where has your exploring taken you? What places and people do you recognize as home to you?
- What that has been home to you do you need to reclaim? To leave behind?
- What justice can we practice to reveal God's presence among us?

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Our Lady of Guadalupe, evangelizer of the Americas, pray for us. Celebrate her feast on December 12.

PRAY

LEADER: Roadways and train tracks crisscross our land.

Airplanes leave trails in the sky.

ALL: Where is the way home?

LEADER: Houses and apartments line our streets.

ALL: Which one is home?

LEADER: People of every color and faith check out with us at the grocery.

ALL: Can we be neighbors to one another?

LEADER: Let us make room for giving in this season of getting.

ALL: Let us reveal Jesus' spirit in our busy Advent lives. God can do great things in us.

Exchange a greeting of peace.



Go to goodgroundpress.com to pray the Holy Women, Full of Grace Advent retreat.