

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Light two blue or purple candles and the pink on your Advent wreath this week. The pink candle symbolizes a turning point in the Advent season toward the joy and light of Christmas.

LEADER: Let us watch joyfully for the day when Christ will come in glory.

ALL: God with us, in us, and for us, lift the sadness that keeps us from feeling joy and hope in your embrace.

LEADER: Strengthen us to participate in the healing work Jesus began.

ALL: Open our eyes to our prejudices, our ears to the poor, our hearts to share ourselves. Amen.

During Advent we create wreaths using the boughs of trees that stay *ever-green* and symbolize the encircling, sustaining life and holy mystery in which we live. In nature Christmas happens as Earth turns toward the sun and the warmth that will bring plants to life in spring, that will green Earth again.

Chlorophyll gives leaves their green color as they transform sunlight into the air we breathe. We humans depend on trees and plants to make oxygen. The breaths we take in and out without

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

thinking image the invisible Spirit, the giver of life, who sustains us.

Climate change calls the people of the world to become a green community that cooperates with Earth's wisdom for sustaining all that lives. Care for our common home and for people who are poor is a Christian obligation.

In a sense God is green; that is, God is life-giving. In the prophetic poetry of Second Isaiah, Sunday's first reading, the Earth greens and people become whole wherever God steps. Second Isaiah speaks from exile in Babylon. He no longer sees God as a divine warrior, commanding heavenly armies that will defeat Israel's enemies and restore the nation. Instead Second Isaiah envisions God leading a new exodus that is not a triumphant military march but a healing, life-giving regathering of a scattered, defeated people.

Second Isaiah imagines God leading the exiled Israelites home through a



desert that bursts forth with springs of water and blossoms wherever God passes. This God strengthens the feeble, heartens the fearful, and heals the broken. In Sunday's gospel Jesus' actions bring life and wholeness among the broken.

● **What does green symbolize or express for you?**

GOSPEL

Jesus brings healing among the people.

NARRATOR: When John the Baptist heard in prison about the works Christ did, he sent a message by his disciples to ask—

DISCIPLE 1: Tell us, are you the one to come?

DISCIPLE 2: Or should we expect someone else?

JESUS: Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind can see; the lame walk; lepers are cured; the deaf hear; the dead are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them. Blessed

are those who do not stumble because of me.

NARRATOR: As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus spoke about him to the crowds.

JESUS: What did you go into the desert to see? A blade of grass bending in the wind? A man dressed up in fancy clothes? People who dress like that live in palaces. Tell me, what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, indeed, but you saw much more than a prophet. For about this



man scripture says, "I will send my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way before you." I assure you that John the Baptist is greater than anyone who has ever lived. But the least one in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.

Matthew 11.2-11

Is Jesus the messiah we expect?

In his ministry Jesus is not hacking dead branches off the family tree of Israel nor winnowing hypocrites from among repentant sinners as John expected the messiah would. Jesus is so different from the axe-wielding, chaff-winnowing judge that John expected that he has to send messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another?"

Jesus' answer echoes the prophet Second Isaiah, who envisions a very different messiah than the one John preaches—a messiah who brings healing and life rather than judgment.

Jesus' answer also describes the ministry and mission he has

sent his disciples to continue. "Go after the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news. 'The reign of God has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Matthew 10.6-8).

As messiah, Jesus reveals the compassionate heart of God. He does not come to exert destructive judgmental power over a suffering people but to bring wholeness and salvation. This gospel calls Matthew's community and us today to examine our expectations of God's reign and receive the blessing Jesus extends to all who do not stumble at his mission of compassion but continue his life-giving work.

● Where do your expectations of God stand on a continuum between winnowing judge and compassionate healer?

● How have your expectations of God changed?

Perhaps Jesus speaks to tensions in the Christian community for which Matthew writes in the A.D. 80s. Perhaps some of John's disciples follow Jesus but defend the Baptist's greatness or echo his voice of judgment rather than live Jesus' call to compassion.

Jesus insists that anyone who truly lives the mystery of Christian discipleship is greater than John the Baptist. Yet, John is no blade of grass fluttering in the wind, no palace bureaucrat,

but a prophet, a relentless seeker, a voice of repentance greater than anyone else. No prophet, even John, envisions God becoming one of us.

If John's disciples understand his heart, they will measure their importance not in status or fame but in attentiveness to seeking the holy in their midst. If the disciples of Jesus Christ understand the heart of their leader, they will find their power in self-giving.

Both John and Jesus are prophets and servants of God. They are not self-serving persons who gather and use power for earthly rewards. Both leaders teach that the reign of God comes through conversion of heart. Jesus calls us to bring others the compassion of God as he does. He calls us to be prophets of healing and hope.

Jesus comes among us not as a powerful king or an apocalyptic judge but as a healing servant. We celebrate every Christmas the surprise of

God sending a human baby to embody God's own power and presence.

- What are you seeing with new eyes or hearing with open ears this Advent?
- How are your actions preaching Jesus' good news?
- What hopeful actions can you bring to those you love this season?
- What judgments of others might you let go?

Our Lady of Guadalupe

In 1519, the Spanish began the conquest of the Aztec empire in Mexico and through battle and disease defeated the indigenous peoples. On December 9, 1531, an Aztec man is on his way to Mass when on a hilltop he hears birds singing and a woman's voice call his name in his own language, "Juan Diego." Juan turns and sees a beautiful woman with brown skin and dark eyes like his own, who is wearing a turquoise cloak covered with stars.

The woman explains that she is Mary, the holy Virgin and Mother of God. She asks Juan to tell the bishop to build a church on this hill in her honor. "In this place I will show all my love and compassion. I am a loving mother to all who live in this land. I will hear their prayers and heal their suffering."

Juan leaves immediately to do as the Lady asks. After a long wait the bishop welcomes Juan and listens to his message but refuses to believe. Juan returns to the Lady. "You have sent me to walk in places where I do not belong," he tells her. "You will have to send someone more important."

"I have many servants, but I send you," the Lady says and sends Juan to try again. This time the bishop asks Juan where he saw this lady and what she looks like. "Bring me a sign that proves she is the Mother of God," he requests.

Juan tells the Lady that the bishop wants a sign. She tells



him that he will find roses on the hilltop to take to the bishop.

Finding roses blooming in December surprises Juan. He cuts them, carries them to the bishop in his cloak (called a *tilma*), and explains how

he found them on the hilltop where only cactus grow.

As Juan opens his *tilma*, the roses tumble to the floor and the bishop falls on his knees. Juan wonders why. Then he sees on his cloak the image of the Lady that spoke to him.

"I will build a church where the Mother of God has asked," the bishop promises. The church still stands in Mexico City to this day and enshrines Juan Diego's *tilma*.



The Holy One gives life, healing.

Like the brown California hills, Israel greens and blooms when it rains. The flourishing of grass, flowers, and crops revealed the presence of God for the ancient peoples of this arid area.

The prophetic poetry of Second Isaiah envisions God restoring the exiled people of Israel to life, just as rain restores the earth. The healing power of Israel's God will strengthen the feeble and make whole the blind, deaf, dumb, and lame. Isaiah calls his own people to faith in God's power to give life and heal—to ransom and restore the exiled people.

Here is your God.

The wilderness and the dry land will exult; the desert will rejoice and bloom. Abundantly they will bloom and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them; the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of God, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm feeble knees; say to those of fearful hearts: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, who comes with vindication; with divine recompense God comes to save you.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be unstopped;

then will the lame leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb will sing.

Those God has ransomed will return and enter Zion singing, crowned with everlasting joy. They will have joy and gladness; sorrow and mourning will flee.

Isaiah 35.1-6,10

God's actions in Babylon far from the exiled Israelites' homeland teaches them their God resides throughout the earth. God's holiness is justice and compassion. The splendor of God becomes visible in restoring life, acting justly, and healing the suffering, the poor, the forgotten. As messiah, Jesus reveals that he is the Holy One of God, the heart of God for the world's people.

The deep compassion of the messiah stirs him into action for justice, especially for people who are poor and powerless. The messiah is water for the desert, food for those who hunger and thirst for justice, joy for those who are sorrowful, strength for the fearful, light for the blind.

- **What broken people can you help mend?**
- **Who can you ransom from captivity and and help green and flourish?**

PRAY

Take a moment of silence. Share around the circle a commitment to do a healing act to ready yourself for Christmas. After sharing, pray together from Psalm 146 below.

LEADER: The Holy One secures justice for the oppressed and food for the hungry. God sets captives free.

ALL: Come, Holy One, make us whole and holy.

LEADER: Our God gives sight to the blind and raises up those who have fallen down.

ALL: Come, Holy One, make us whole and holy.

SING: *O come, our wisdom from on high and order all things with your loving eye. Show us your gentle wisdom's way. And teach us how to live her love each day. Rejoice! Rejoice! O Israel, to you shall come Emmanuel.*



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

DO SOMETHING



Write letters of gratitude and hope to friends, family, neighbors, teachers, healers who have touched your life in especially meaningful ways this year. Write letters of sympathy to someone whose story in the news touches you.