

By Nancy Corcoran, CSJ

**R**ecall the names of three people you have been with today. Ask God to bless each one as your group lights three candles on your Advent wreath, ending with the pink candle.

**LEADER:** Today we pray for joy to lighten the heart of each of us.

**ALL: Let us rejoice and be glad.**

**LEADER:** Help us recognize everyday ways to bring joy to our neighbors, especially those in need.

**ALL: Let us take a step beyond our usual circles.**

**LEADER:** Let us open our doors to God's mercy.

**ALL: May our joy prove contagious for all we meet.**

**C**rowds are listening to John the Baptist scold his hearers because they come seeking baptism, a sign of a new and changed life, but have made no changes. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he says, challenging the people to do the work of changing how they live.

The crowd wants specifics. Some ask, "What, then, should we do?" Tax collectors and soldiers are among those who step up and want to know what they have to do to be baptized.

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

When I was young, this scene confused me. Although I grew up in a town that was 80% Jewish, my family and my friends were all Christians, so I assumed everybody was. I didn't learn much about Jewish religious practices as a child.

When I began to hear stories about Jesus, I assumed that Jesus was Christian. I thought John the Baptist was Christian. I even thought Mary and Joseph were Christians. I thought John was baptizing Jesus and the people in Sunday's gospel just as I had been baptized when I was a baby.

Imagine our surprise when we learned that Jesus and his whole family and all his friends, and most people mentioned in the gospels were Jewish!

The gospels of Advent take Christians back into Jewish history, of which many of us know too little.

The scriptures of Israel continue to help people today recognize God's presence in our world. John the Baptizer calls us to conversion this Advent just as he called Jews of his time to change and align their everyday actions with God's compassion, justice, and care for the poor.

- What do you recognize as Jewish about Jesus, his family and friends?
- What do you value about Jewish religious faith and practice?
- What do you want to know more about?



# GOSPEL

## Who is wheat and who is chaff?

**NARRATOR:** Crowds of people came to hear John the Baptist and seek the baptism of repentance he proclaimed.

**CROWD:** John, what should we do?

**JOHN:** Let people with two coats give to people who have none. People who have lots of food should do the same.

**NARRATOR:** Tax collectors came to be baptized.

**TAX COLLECTORS:** What are we to do, Teacher?

**JOHN:** Don't collect more than people really owe.

**NARRATOR:** Soldiers came to John, too.

**SOLDIERS:** What about us? What should we do?

**JOHN:** Do not bully people or accuse

them falsely. Be satisfied with your pay.

**NARRATOR:** People's hopes began to rise.

**CROWD:** Maybe John is the promised one, the messiah.

**NARRATOR:** John answered them.

**JOHN:** I am baptizing you in water, but One is coming who is greater than I. I am not worthy to loosen his sandal straps. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. His winnowing fan is in his hands, ready to separate wheat from chaff. He will gather

the wheat into his barn. The chaff he will burn in a fire that never goes out.

**NARRATOR:** With exhortations like this, John preached the good news to the people.

Luke 3.10-18



## John the Baptist challenges us to change our lives.

What exactly is John doing by the River Jordan? Why are Jewish people seeking baptism? The word *baptism* comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, meaning to *dip under*, to *immerse*, to *wash*.

Among Jews the ritual of dipping or immersing in water signifies spiritual cleansing. The water must be living water—fresh, running water as in the River Jordan. This cleansing is

called *mikveh* (*mick-vah*). The term *mikveh* in Hebrew refers to any gathering of waters. Jewish law uses the term specifically for the waters or bath for ritual immersion and purification.

In Hebrew the word *mikveh* comes from the same three consonant roots as the word for hope. The root *kvh* means to *wait for*, to *endure*. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of God as the *mikvah* of Israel, the hope of

Israel, or the awaited of Israel. To take the cleansing bath John preaches is to turn toward God and the hope Jews await. It is an act of conversion that commits one to new ways of acting.

In Sunday's gospel John the Baptist insists his hearers must focus and change their daily lives before they receive the baptism. When the crowd asks John what they are to do, John tells them to share their belongings and food with those who are without clothes and food. He tells the tax collectors to collect only the money taxes require. He tells the soldiers not to bully people or accuse them falsely. John calls them to do justice in their everyday life and work.

Only when the crowd has chosen to take care of others can they immerse themselves in the water and receive the baptism of repentance. John teaches that uncleanliness is a spiritual rather than a physical condition.

When people wash in the Jordan, they express a commitment to just living. They have enacted their turning toward sharing what they have, honest exchange in taxes and business, respecting each other, and building peace. As they emerge from the water, they stand before God not only as children of Abraham by blood but people of the covenant by commitment.

To mark significant events in one's life is another reason for immersion in water in Jewish tradition. After the birth of

a child, a woman goes to the *mikveh* to signify the life change.

A friend of mine went to the *mikveh* after he was cured from cancer. His life was different from that day onward.

After his immersion in the Jordan, Jesus arises from the water to teach in a public way. He changes direction from a private life to a public life. With the others refocusing their lives on God, he marks his change of direction with a reviving cleansing.

● **What is your experience of water cleansing and reviving you?**

● **What is a way you have marked a turning toward God in your life?**

**T**he Talmud records the discussions by rabbis on Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history. Like the Torah (Hebrew Bible) the Talmud is a central text in Judaism. It holds inspiring stories about famous rabbis.

One of my favorites involves Rabbi Hillel, who was born to a wealthy family in Babylonia. He

## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

● Every time we pull out our credit cards, we can consider the pope's insight—"Purchasing is always a moral and not simply an economic act" (206). What is good about our purchases? Who are they helping? How are they making the world better not only for my family but the human and earth community?

traveled to Jerusalem without the financial support of his family and, like Jesus, supported himself as a woodcutter. He gained admission to study Torah at a yeshiva where he became a brilliant scholar known for his kindness, his gentleness, and his concern for humanity.

Once a Gentile approached Rabbi Hillel, saying that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel converted the Gentile with these immortal words, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.' That is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn."

Jesus could have studied Rabbi Hillel's words. He died in Jerusalem when Jesus was about 10 years old. Jesus puts the same concept in a positive spin as he counsels us, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

● **Who are the kind and gentle teachers in your life?**

**T**he people who question John the Baptist in Sunday's gospel help us examine our consciences this Advent. Christians no longer share the ritual of *mikveh* with our Jewish brothers and sisters, but we share the responsibility to care for those who are without the basics of life.

Just as John the Baptist helped people in his time examine their consciences, Pope Francis is calling us to ecological conversion. He wants us to redefine progress, so it can include all people and sustain all. "A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally better quality of life cannot be considered progress," he writes in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* (#194).

Earth is a common good, a homeland for all. Our lifestyle in the U.S. would require at least four planets for all to consume at our level.

What are we to do? Francis urges all of us to pause and recover depth, to see beauty,



share joy, and keep up our human capacity to encounter and care for one another (#113). To preserve our common home, “It is we humans above all who need to change,” he insists (#202). “We know how unsustainable is the behavior of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity” (#193).

Families matter in practicing new daily actions, such as “avoiding the use of plastic and papers, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or carpooling, turning off unnecessary lights, planting trees” (#211).

John the Baptist announces someone greater than he is coming, someone who carries a winnowing fan. Winnowing separates wheat from chaff. People who repent are wheat who can become bread for those in need. People who don’t repent are empty husks.

- Talk as a family about the places in creation that have given you joy.
- What inspires you about the pope’s encyclical? What threatens you?
- In what ways can you participate in the culture of care Pope Francis wants us to build? What practical steps?
- Invite the young people in your family to suggest daily actions that will help keep Earth sustainable.



## A remnant rejoices in God’s coming.

Sunday’s first reading from Zephaniah is the only upbeat prophecy this sixth-century prophet ever made. His preaching describes the day of the Lord’s coming as a day of doom for Jerusalem and all its people who worship other gods. “A day of wrath is that day, a day of anguish and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom.” The funeral hymn *Dies Irae* takes up this passage.

But in his final verse Zephaniah envisions a remnant of humble, lowly people who take refuge in God. From them God will remove all judgment. They need not fear the day of the Lord’s coming into their midst. For the repentant, the day of God’s coming is joy. Such a remnant has gathered around John the Baptist in Luke’s gospel.

## God rejoices over Israel.

Shout for joy, O daughter Zion!  
Sing joyfully, O Israel!  
Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!  
God has removed the judgment against you and turned away your enemies;  
The ruler of Israel, the Holy One, is in your midst.  
You have no more misfortune to fear.  
On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
Fear not, O Zion,

be not discouraged!  
Your God is in your midst,  
a mighty savior;  
God will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in love. God will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals.

Zephaniah 3.14-18

- How do you open your life to God’s coming?
- What gives you joy?

## PRAY

**Leader:** Let us take a little quiet time to ask John the Baptist, “What can I do this Christmas?” *Pause.* Let us present our needs to God in every form of prayer and petitions full of gratitude.

*Take turns praying for people about whom you are concerned and/or sharing a way you hear John and Pope Francis calling you to conversion.*

**Leader:** May God’s own peace, which is beyond understanding, stand guard over our minds and hearts in Christ Jesus.

**All:** May we be a blessing to each other during this season when we long for light. Amen.



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