

Weekly Sunday Readings Reflections

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Third Sunday of Advent – December 14, 2025

“The one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist!”

Question of the Week: What are your spiritual expectations of the Advent Season?

- **First Reading: Isaiah 35: 1-6a, 10**

Be strong; fear not!

- **Responsorial: Psalm 146: 6-10**

R: Lord, come and save us.

- **Second Reading: James 5: 7-10**

Be patient, brothers and sisters

- **Gospel: Matthew 11: 2-11**

“Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”

Reading 1: Desolation to Hope

What gives you hope when you feel down?

Although rooted in first Isaiah, these passages rang true beyond their historical underpinnings. The verses portray eschatological hope, yet assume a dire situation. Notice the contrasts. The barren wilderness would rejoice in springtime bloom. The beauty of natural wonders would be given to the most desolate environs. God would reveal himself in lowest places. And these areas would respond in worship. [35:1-2]

Like the wilderness, the poor and weak would feel the saving touch of God. Those beaten down would be strengthened with a new courage. The ill would be healed. The blind would see. [35:3-6a]

Both the place and the people seem to be in ruin. Yet God would return their glory. In the mind of Isaiah and his contemporaries, this

glory would signal a return to past heights for the monarchy. For Jesus' peers, the glory would look ahead to the end of days.

No matter whether we look back or forward for the "ideal" time, let us remember Isaiah spoke of God's initiative, not our own. God's initiative found its zenith in the birth of Jesus. Like Isaiah's audience (or Matthew's), we, too, look forward to the time God visits his people.

What words give you hope when you are down? Why do these words encourage you?

Psalm: Praise the Lord Throughout Life

What are the benefits of trust in God?

To be honest, I'm one of those impatient sort of people. As I grew up, my mother would see me ready to explode when things would not go my way. At those times, she would always

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remind me: "Patience is a virtue that has its own reward."

Like patience, faith has its own reward: happiness. People who really trust in God are truly happy. They have someone who looks over them; they have someone who is trustworthy and full of love. They have someone they can emulate in their dealings with their fellow human beings. Most importantly, those who trust God touch his eternal nature. Their faith is a window into an existence beyond the boundaries of space and time. While they experience God within the confines of this life, that experience points to a life outside of those confines.

Psalm 146 presented a compressed view of the Mosaic covenant, surrounded by a hymn of praise. The psalm was remarkable in its implicit belief that YHWH was eternal, based upon his activity in the temporal realm; in other words, his mighty deeds in the history of Israel revealed his immortality. Those mighty deeds were delineated in his covenant with the Chosen people. The creator also saved the poor, the feeble and crippled, the prisoner, the stranger, the widow and the orphan. The psalmist seemed to state that the faithful Jew would follow the example of God in his dealing with the less fortunate. YHWH revealed his eternal nature through his mercy and compassion; the faithful Jew could touch eternity through similar acts.

Praise acted as bookends to this remarkable vision of God. 146:1-2 indicated this praise was a life-long endeavor that overtook family allegiances or political alliances (146:3-4). Trust in the God of Jacob was a beatitude (146:5), for YHWH was the true, eternal deity (146:10). Trust in and allegiance to the eternal

God led to a happiness that touched on eternity.

As Christians, we believe that faith in God now will lead to a life with God forever. Praising God throughout life makes a statement in that belief. We praise God for what he has done and is doing now in life. In his activities, we can experience his eternal nature and can gain more and more reasons to believe that we will live with him forever.

Take time to praise God now. How can you make this praise a daily habit? How does your praise reinforce your faith in an afterlife?

Reading 2: Patience Without Distraction

How are your Christmas preparations coming along? How many distractions and irritations have you been faced with this holiday season?

5:7, 8: "presence of the (returning) LORD" The word "presence" in Greek is "parousia," a word that referred to the Second Coming.

5:7b "The farmer waits for the valuable crops of the earth" The word "crops" is literally "fruits."

5:7c "(they) receive the early (rainy season) and the later (rainy season)" The harvest of crops was partially dependent upon the rainy season. If James was written in Palestine as many scholars believe, the rainy seasons would have been in the winter to early spring. The strange growing season was due to the desert climate (hot summers, mild winters). Lack of a constant water supply in many areas

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would make farming more dependent on rain fall than on the season itself.

The book of James is one of the more misunderstood books of the Bible. Many believe James faced off against Paul in the "faith vs. works" controversy. However, a closer inspection of each author reveals shades of meaning and emphasis. Paul chose faith in Christ over the duties (i.e., the "works") of the Law; in this sense, Paul believed Christianity provided a means for salvation that mere observance of the Law could not achieve. More bluntly, Paul held one could not "earn" his or her way into heaven. Salvation required a personal relationship with Christ. In his writings, Paul seemed to address not only his audience, but also his Jewish critics.

James, however, was not concerned with Jewish foes or Jewish-Christians that insisted on strict adherence to the Law. James seemed to focus on the cohesion of the community itself. For James, faith was more a matter of professing creed than a dynamic trust relationship with the Lord. For James, works were acts of charity that brought the community together.

Notice how James wove his definition of faith and works together in these few verses. The doctrine of the Lord's return still held great currency among those in his audience. Here, James counseled patience, even using an agricultural analogy. As the community waited, however, how should they act? Implicit in the critic of James lie the realization that the community's unity around an anticipation of the Second Coming was wearing thin. Many members of the community began to take their vision from the

coming of the Lord; these were now gossips, back-biters, and rumor mongers. Cohesion in the community was breaking down. While James may have counseled patience, he also reminded his audience (especially critics within the community) that they could not rest easy. Any act that tore at the unity of the assembly would come before Christ at the end of time for judgement. Times may be tough, James seemed to say, but that was no reason to be tough on others. Instead, the doctrine of the Second Coming should be a reason for community building and unity of believers.

James was famous for saying "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). Indeed, we should be patient for the coming of the Lord, but patience does not mean distraction. A distracted faith is a dead faith, for it does not lead to action. As we wait for the coming of the Lord at Christmas, let us keep in mind that HE IS COMING, but in his own time and his own way. We need both patience and focus to truly prepare for his arrival.

Pray for patience and focus this season. Slow down, if you need to. Prepare with patience in mind.

Gospel: What Do We Expect From God?

Have you caught the "holiday spirit" yet? How do you get into the holiday mood? Do you rely on others or events to spark your "Christmas feeling?"

Christmas is coming soon. The lights, the sounds, the smells of the holidays are in the air. No matter where we go, we are reminded

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of holiday cheer. In fact, many of us rely on this atmosphere to bring us out of our doldrums. We expect people, places, or events to create the mood that Christmas brings.

Human nature tempts us to lean on others to bolster our condition. We expect others to "fix" us when we are down, sustain us when we are "up." We are tempted to treat God the same way. God, the Mr. Fix-it for our souls.

What happens when God doesn't "fix" us? How many times have we been disappointed when our expectations of God are unfulfilled? How many times have we confused faith with expectation? How many times have we forgotten that God defines himself?

John the Baptist had expectations about the One to come. Did Jesus fulfill his expectations? Or, did Jesus define his mission on his own terms?

Matthew's gospel faces us with the difference between what we expect of others and what they can deliver. John expected someone greater than he. Jesus gave an answer that may have been different from what John expected. In that exchange we discover how Jesus saw his own ministry and the ministry of John the Baptist.

11:5 "the poor are being told the Good News." is literally "the poor are evangelized." Notice the activities in 11:5 are listed in the reverse order of importance. The wonders performed only add to the legitimacy of Jesus' primary function: to preach the Good News.

11:6 This verse is a beatitude. The Greek word "makarios" can mean "happy, blessed or fortunate." Jesus assumed the only people not

scandalized were believers. He did not refer to the apathetic or disinterested.

11:8 "in the houses of kings" The "houses" could either refer to the royal court (building) or the king's clan (family). The former is preferred.

11:10 This verse which combined Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20 compared the prophet to the traveling crier. A royal crier would precede the king in areas to be visited. The local people would prepare for the king's arrival with public work projects (fresh paint, cleaned roads, etc.). Of course, Jesus referred the spiritual preparations John made.

11:11 "greater" means "important." Here Jesus is again comparing people of "this generation" to those of the Kingdom. The difference is so great that even a looming figure like John the Baptist would be stand small in the Kingdom. Jesus wasn't belittling John. He was emphasizing the great and different nature of God's reign. What did John expect? From last week's study, we know that John foresaw someone who would carry on his ministry at a higher level. The One greater than John would fulfill John's prophecies; he would be the instrument of God's judgment and usher in God's Kingdom. In prison, however, John did not see continuity of his ministry; his prophecies were not fulfilled (to his satisfaction) and the end did not come. Was Jesus of Nazareth the answer to his prayers? [11:2-3]

Luke's gospel tells us John and Jesus were second cousins. (Luke 1 & 2) Matthew portrays John objecting to his baptism of Jesus; John saw Jesus as his better. (Matthew 3:13-17) But, neither gospel tells us of the

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relationship between the two. Many modern scripture scholars speculate that Jesus was a disciple of John's before he began his own ministry. Indeed, Jesus' early preaching echoed John's message: "Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand." (Mark 1:15) After John's arrest, Jesus began his following and developed a distinct organization and a style that was different from John's.

Jesus answered John's question with a reference to Isaiah (26:19, 29:18-19, 35:5-6, 61:1). The physical maladies of the poor would be healed so they could hear the Good News. [11:4-5] Notice Jesus performed "works" the common people associated with the Kingdom (healing). These maladies could have a social as well as physical reference. The blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf, and the dead were symbolic for sinners and excommunicated outcasts, people who were the core of Jesus ministry. So, Jesus could claim both the poor and the outcast as his. This was the message John's followers were to bring back; this was the challenge Jesus presented to everyone, as well as John. Blessed was the one who was not scandalized by his twofold Messiahship. [11:4-6]

Jesus turned to the crowd to ask them a set of rhetorical questions. Why did they go to the desert? To see the scenery? To see the rich and famous? Or to see a prophet? Yes, John was a prophet; his ministry was one of preparation. And his ministry was foretold by the prophets (Malachi 3:1, Exodus 23:20). [11:7-10]

With his comments about his own ministry and that of John's, Jesus implicitly compared the two. John prepared people for the Kingdom; Jesus involved people in the Kingdom. John stood as a Kingdom signpost.

As Messiah, Jesus was the Kingdom. As the one preparing the populace, John was greater than anyone else up to that point. But, was John ready to partake in the kingdom? Was he willing to accept the witness of his two followers about Jesus' works? Everyone who still considered the faith question was the least in the Kingdom. [11:11]

Catechism Themes: The Public Ministry of Jesus and The Signs of the Kingdom

548 The signs worked by Jesus attest that the Father has sent him. They invite belief in him. To those who turn to him in faith, he grants what they ask. So miracles strengthen faith in the One who does his Father's works; they bear witness that he is the Son of God. But his miracles can also be occasions for "offense"; they are not intended to satisfy people's curiosity or desire for magic. Despite his evident miracles some people reject Jesus; he is even accused of acting by the power of demons.

549 By freeing some individuals from the earthly evils of hunger, injustice, illness, and death, Jesus performed messianic signs. Nevertheless he did not come to abolish all evils here below, but to free men from the gravest slavery, sin, which thwarts them in their vocation as God's sons and causes all forms of human bondage.

We expect much from the Lord who gives us much. His gifts challenge us to pass them along to others, especially those in need. As Jesus has freed us from need, so we, too, must free others from need.

Sometimes, however, all we can do is stand in awe. While these experiences help to

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strengthen our faith, we should not depend upon them in the future. An experience of God is a gift, not an expectation. Once we build our faith solely upon awe experiences, we focus upon them as if they were magic. We might think that these experiences should be an everyday event; if we have a "down" day, our prayer life dwells only upon a return to the "wow" experience. When we do not have a consistent spiritual high, we might be tempted to reject faith as an illusion. We might forget the passion of Christ; even pain and depression are paths to God. Even "down" days are God's gifts to us.

As a part of preparing for Christmas, reflect on your expectations of the holidays. Are they realistic? Can people or events fulfill your ideals? Or can you set aside your expectations so God can surprise you?

What do we expect from God? Miracles or magic. Miracles engage us in a faith dialogue with God; we become part of the miracle as it becomes a part of us. Magic, however, is meant for entertainment. It impresses us, but does not change us. Miracles demand a response; magic demands applause. Do we pray to be engaged or impressed?

As Christmas approaches, it's time to ask the question. What do we expect from God? Do we want to follow him? Or, do we want him to fix us? Do we seek to be with him? Or, do we expect him to be with us?

Have we confused faith with expectation? Faith puts God in charge. Expectation puts us in charge. Faith allows God to surprise us. Expectation does not.

*What should we expect from God? Nothing.
What should we believe God can do?*

Everything! Even the surprise of his Son born in a poor stable.