

John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah: *A voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord."* Words from our Gospel today from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke – sisters and brothers, may the Lord give to you his peace and his joy.

Admiral Stockdale was captured during the Vietnam War and kept in a POW camp for eight horrendous years. Since he was the highest-ranking American in the Viet Cong camp, he was often tortured more and submitted to more brutal treatment than the others so as to try to break his spirit. When Admiral Stockdale returned to the United States, he was asked about the difference between the men who lived through the ordeal and those who succumbed to the harsh treatment and ended up being crushed by it. In his book, *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins asked him about those who were the first to be defeated by their situation. Admiral Stockdale replied:

Oh that's easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, "We're going to be out by Christmas." And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say "We're going to be out by Easter." And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.

Stockdale, and the others who survived, however, had a different attitude. They *fought* to live. Their perspective was completely different from those who merely wished for rescue or were optimistic about freedom. They *acted*. And they acted based on one clear and fundamental belief: *Life has meaning*. Stockdale continued: "I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn that experience into the defining event of my life, which in retrospect, I would not trade." The Admiral recognized that, while the POW life of constant torture and solitary confinement in which he was living did not make any sense, he was part of a greater story, and thus had the power to be an 'actor' in his own story. While he was not in control of everything that happened to him, Stockdale could control some things. He was willing to act when and how he had the power to act. Living like this did not mean merely wishing things would change; it meant facing reality and working towards that change. Again in his own words, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever that might be."

I've said this before, hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is an active virtue and requires our participation. If someone desires to be a person of hope, a person who has the will that what is good might become reality, he or she must be a person of *meaning and action*. John the Baptist is highlighting these two aspects of hope for us in our Gospel today. He tells us not only to expect the coming of the Messiah who will bring salvific meaning into our lives, but that we have to take steps to prepare the way for his coming.

We live in a hopeless age. Don't get me wrong, there is an awful lot of optimism, but very little hope. The source of this hopelessness is a profound lack of meaning in most people's lives.

Many of us live our lives looking forward to the next thing. We say things like, 'It might be rough now, but once I get that promotion then I'll be fine.' Or 'I know that I'm lonely now but once I find someone then I'll be fine.' Or 'I know that my spouse and I are discontented now but once we have kids then we will be fine.' Or the thousand other things we look forward to that will help us to be "fine." There is nothing inherently wrong with looking forward to something, but sooner or later we discover that it just doesn't deliver. We go on to the next thing and are no better off. *We miss the meaning of the moments of our lives because we have forgotten that all of life is meaningful.*

This is why being a Christian – a real follower of Jesus Christ – is a game changer. All of us experience the pain that the world throws at us. All of us experience discouragement and even utter destruction (i.e. we are all going to die someday). Like Admiral Stockdale, all of us will be confronted with situations where we cannot escape and where wishing isn't enough to get us through. As Christians, we know that God has made this world good. We know that evil and suffering and death are not a part of God's plan for our lives, but that our God is with us in the midst of even the worst and most destructive storms. Emmanuel, "God-with-us," the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which we celebrate at Christmas, demonstrates this. We know that God can work good out of everything that comes against his children. The Easter triumph over the grave proves this. We have this hope, this confidence, that our lives have meaning and are directed towards this ultimate union with God in heaven. St. Paul tells us today that God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. We need to cooperate with God on this. Thus, hope leads us to action because if our lives have meaning, then all of our choices have meaning too.

How does a person grow in hope? By reconnecting with God's story. By being reminded that we believe that there is more to this life than just this life. By being committed to the truth that God is in all things and all moments and that our decisions matter. And then... by simply beginning to make choices. Decide. Act on those decisions. You cannot do everything, but you can do something. Do what you can, and you will find that hope has become a powerful force in your life.<sup>1</sup> I might not be able to end the cycle of poverty that leads to hunger and homelessness, but hope can lead me to donate to the West Seneca Food Pantry or Catholic Charities or advocate on a political and social level for effective policy changes so as to make a difference in the world. I might not be able to cure disease or mental illness but hope can lead me to visit family members and friends in the hospital or give angel tree gifts to the WNY Children's Psychiatric Center so they know that they are not alone and are cared for. I cannot control people or unduly manipulate them into making better life choices, but I can take responsibility for my personal faults and failings, and along with everyone here at Queen of Heaven be vigilant against the assaults of evil. This is the kind of hope, these are the kinds of things that prepare us for the Lord's coming, and not so much the Christmas trees and cookies and lights. So this Advent, this great season of hope, let us grow in this virtue by realizing that we play a vital role in God's story, and take concrete steps to prepare the way of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Work extensively borrows from: Fr. Mike Schmitz, "A Powerful Force," in *Beautiful Hope: Finding Hope Every Day in a Broken World* (Beacon Publishing: North Palm Beach, FL, 2017), pgs. 17-22.

Weekend Readings: <http://usccb.org/bible/readings/120918.cfm>

**Second Sunday of Advent**

**Lectionary: 6**

**Reading 1 [BAR 5:1-9](#)**

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Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;  
put on the splendor of glory from God forever:  
wrapped in the cloak of justice from God,  
bear on your head the mitre  
that displays the glory of the eternal name.  
For God will show all the earth your splendor:  
you will be named by God forever  
the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship.

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.  
Led away on foot by their enemies they left you:  
but God will bring them back to you  
borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.  
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 kind of tree  
have overshadowed Israel at God's command;  
for God is leading Israel in joy  
by the light of his glory,  
with his mercy and justice for company..

**Responsorial Psalm [PS 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6.](#)**

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**R. (3) The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,  
we were like men dreaming.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with rejoicing.

**R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

Then they said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."

The LORD has done great things for us;  
we are glad indeed.

**R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,  
like the torrents in the southern desert.

Those who sow in tears  
shall reap rejoicing.

**R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

Although they go forth weeping,  
carrying the seed to be sown,

They shall come back rejoicing,  
carrying their sheaves.

**R. The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.**

**Reading 2 [PHIL 1:4-6, 8-11](#)**

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Brothers and sisters:

I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you,  
because of your partnership for the gospel  
from the first day until now.

I am confident of this,  
that the one who began a good work in you  
will continue to complete it  
until the day of Christ Jesus.

God is my witness,  
how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer:

that your love may increase ever more and more  
in knowledge and every kind of perception,  
to discern what is of value,  
so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,  
filled with the fruit of righteousness  
that comes through Jesus Christ  
for the glory and praise of God.

**Alleluia [LK 3:4, 6](#)**

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**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths:  
all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

**Gospel [LK 3:1-6](#)**

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In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,  
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,  
and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee,  
and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region  
of Ituraea and Trachonitis,  
and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,  
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,  
the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert.  
John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,  
as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*A voice of one crying out in the desert:*

*“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight his paths.*

*Every valley shall be filled  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low.  
The winding roads shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth,  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*