

What do you expect?



The Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

First Reading Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;

the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;

the unclean shall not travel on it,

but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;

they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Second Reading James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Gospel Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news

brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

A couple of weeks ago on vacation in California, we came across a curious sign as we walked along the Los Angeles River. It had the appearance of a regular street sign - yellow diamond in shape with black writing - and at first I didn't really notice anything different, until we got closer. Near enough to see the sign in full view its oddness became clear. In the middle of the sign was a large infinity symbol, flanked by an upward and downward arrow on either side with the wording 'infinite clearance' printed below. I took it to be an indicator of that wonderful California spirit that has room for us all. Later that day, I saw another odd street sign, again at first seemingly indicating that this was a one way street, expect it was planted in a city park by some trees and shaped like a heart.

It turns out that the signs are the work of local artist Scott Froschauer who has erected twenty such signs across the city as an art installation called 'Word on the Street'. Each of them familiar, yet not what they seem. According to the artist, the signs are intended for the people who see them to 'second-guess their expectations'.

I love that description and how appropriate for Advent, the season that asks each of us to examine our expectations on our way to the manger. As we prepare to enter the nativity scene once more, Advent is the opening we have to ask yourself: what are you looking for?

Expectation is the word writ large across our scripture readings this morning. This is the Sunday we meet John the Baptizer's commitment to the expectation the people had that surely now is the time for God to do a new thing. Even John's prison cell is no impediment to his asking after Jesus' credentials. Are you the one we have been expecting, or should we wait for someone else? John's desert preaching of repentance implores Israel to turn around and see the Lamb of God on the horizon of their hope. 'Are you the one?' he so desperately wants to know.

On this third Sunday, traditionally also known as Gaudete Sunday referencing the soon to be fulfilled joy of Christ's birth, we also meet the generative expectation of Mary, not merely for the birth of a child but for the birth of a new world. As she waits for God to come to term in her, the hope growing in her is that the world might come to terms with God. In the words of her magnificat, her song of praise, she sees the lowly be lifted up and the hungry fed; the mighty cast down from their thrones and the rich sent away empty.

As we hear it in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' answer to both his mother Mary's hope and John's questions about whether he is the one they have been expecting is offered back couched within the language of the prophetic tradition of Isaiah:

*'the blind receive their sight,
the lame walk,
the lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear,
the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news'.*

Jesus' answer, then, is clear: this is the beginning of God's new dispensation for the world; everything is being made new.

That is our Advent hope: that in Jesus the world is becoming a new creation. Yet, when we look at the world, a first glance, it doesn't seem that way. From the grand narrative of our age of ultra wealth where it was noted this week in the *World Inequality Report* that 0.001% of the world's population control three times as much wealth as the entire bottom half of humanity, to the local tragedies of mass shootings at Brown University, Rhode Island and Bondi Beach, Australia this weekend, it looks like all we have to see at the manger is a beautiful yet in the end an impotent story. Mary's magnificat makes for some fine music but it is not how the world has ended up. The rich are yet to have been sent away empty; the mighty remain on their thrones.

A world unchanged is not what Mary and John and all those who followed Jesus in their wake had expected. However, to see a world that inclines us to want to turn off the news and shelter in place in houses of worship like this is not all that there is to see. On closer inspection, the signs of the times are not singularly a bleak picture of the failure of peace and justice to prevail on the earth. Move closer in to the lives of the people around you, near and far, and we might get to see something of what Mary saw.

Mary didn't believe that she would actually see a world where Herod would be thrown from his throne, any more than she believed that the emperor in Rome would be sent away empty when his soldiers demanded exorbitant taxes. What she did expect to see, though, is what faithful people who have lived on the underside of history have seen for generations: that in the face of suppressive power, God's solidarity with humankind is the most potent form of transformation there is, and that in Jesus that divine solidarity was being made flesh anew. Mary expects the world will be changed, not because she trusts in a fantastical notion of divine intervention, but because she gave her life, her very body, to the conviction that there is no greater source of hope in the world than the one that proclaims Immanuel; God is with us.

When we make our arrival at the manger of Christ we come upon the opening scene of God's solidarity with us through the life of Jesus. It is at first familiar, yet as we draw closer in we notice that divine solidarity is not a one way street, but is intended to be reciprocated. That is how the world is changed.

If you find yourself despairing at the state of the world, let this church be the place in your life where you are encouraged to stay awake to the hope we find in God's solidarity. Let this be the place where we trouble the waters for one another, where we refuse to say that the world is too much for us. Let this be the place where we commit not to give in to a splendid isolation from the world but believe with Mary that the self-giving love that we know in God is the only power true enough to change a world too often bent on hatred and division.

In this expectant season of Advent, I invite you to seek after the creator of the heavens and the earth, the One who spoke the incarnate Word into human history and is speaking to you now. Listen for that voice and allow your faith to flourish in the life you lead beyond this place with courage and confidence in all that God will do because you have chosen to trust that Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, God with us. We know the world is not as God intends for it to be. It's what we expect happens next that counts. Amen.