

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS*** 2<sup>nd</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)  
Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11 Psalm 85 2 Peter 3: 8-14 Mark 1: 1-8  
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Have you ever played “Let’s Pretend” with a child? “Let’s pretend that you are a princess and I am your loyal servant.” “Let’s pretend the you are a brave knight and I am a dragon.” Children really get involved in games like that and for a few moments of play the fantasy becomes real for them. But for us adults it is harder to put aside the harsh realities of these days and pretend a fantasy world.

For many, the list of woes is just too long and the daily struggle too arduous and constant to be layered over or put aside by games of “Let’s pretend.” Even if we aren’t experiencing personal or familial crises these days, how can we not be distressed by the war, civil strife, forced migration of millions, the economic downturn of the world’s major economies, with the accompanying loss of jobs and security for so many?

Perhaps the approaching Christmas season will offer relief and distraction for us as we turn our attention to the children. They deserve a season of fun, celebration and “Let’s Pretend.” But we adults can’t pretend the hardships of so many in the world and our personal concerns don’t exist. Nor are they dismissed so easily by our flights of fancy, “Let’s pretend everything is just fine for the season” – it just doesn’t work.

As we read the scriptures, we notice the central figures who are brought to our attention are hardly having a “jolly” season themselves. We hear about poor shepherds out in the night fields; a pregnant unwed teenage girl; wise men on a quest, not sure where they are going to wind up; the future spouse whose plans are upset when he discovers his fiancé is pregnant and he is not sure what to do next; and there are untold numbers of people under Roman domination who are wondering if their long-held hopes for a messiah have been make believe and in vain. These central figures in our story are not quite ready to sing, “Joy to the World” – it’s too early. It’s Advent and all we have are people on their own, wondering, waiting and hoping.

Well that’s not true, is it? They, we, are not on our own. We know that because there is a chief Actor in our story who hasn’t been named yet. But the scripture has

named the major player – it is God. And God has noticed our condition and is coming to help us.

Today's passage from Isaiah must certainly stand out as one of the most beautiful and poignant in the Bible. It also faces and addresses the harsh reality of the people of Israel. The earlier Isaiah confronted them for they had ignored God; their worship had become empty and their poor neglected. That was before they were taken off into slavery. But now they are a desolate people and so the prophet speaks words of consolation to those returning from exile to a ravaged country, with Jerusalem and the temple in ruins. Surrounded by desolation Isaiah speaks words of comfort and offers hope.

Is Isaiah playing “Let's Pretend Everything is Going to be Fine” – or are his words backed by the power of God? It all depends on how we receive them. Believers hear words of consolation and hope; God has forgiven their guilt and is already preparing a place for them. At our very lowest God is raising us up, giving a vision of the “glory of the Lord” that will be revealed to us. When and How and Where – will this happen?

We who gather at Eucharist today have already received answers to these questions. We don't yet know the whole story; we still lean on hope; but Isaiah's promise and vision have been fulfilled in Jesus. In him we have received the prophet's promised “comfort”; in Jesus “the glory of the Lord” has been revealed. A way in our desert has been opened for us and God “like a shepherd” is feeding and leading the flock. While we have not yet come to the end of our wearisome journey; while we have not yet had all the burdens lifted from our shoulders, still, we are not playing “Let's Pretend” – not if we are believers who trust in the power of God's Word to do what it has promised. “Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low...”

Which takes us into today's gospel. It from Mark and the evangelist sounds breathless, as if he can't wait to tell us that the One we hoped and waited for so long has finally come. In Mark's gospel there is no back story: he skips over the preliminaries about Elizabeth and Zachary, the Annunciation and birth of Christ and the stories of Jesus' early years. Instead, he rushes to tell us about the new beginning God is offering us in Jesus. He refers back to Isaiah's promise of renewal and restoration and announces its beginning. John the Baptist is the herald of this good news and Jesus is the “mightier one” the desert prophet announces. The old promises are being fulfilled, and a new way of life is being offered. It is, Mark tells us, “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” At the

conclusion of his gospel Mark doesn't say the story is ended. It has begun in Jesus and has no ending for it continues to be good news in each generation of faithful ones who receive it, as we do today.

A lot has changed since last Advent, and not just in the financial and housing markets. Some names have been dropped from our Christmas card list, because of death or a broken relationship. There are new-borns in our family. We have ailments we didn't used to have. There have also been a series of firsts: first days at a new school; first dates; first days on a new job; first loss of a job; first days of married life, etc. We have been reminded again this year that events are not predictable; life is always changing and often life catches us by surprise. One day's security can lead to the next day's insecurity.

John the Baptist's voice reaches us from across the ages, from another time and another land. He reminds us of a wisdom we already know but may have been ignoring: God alone is our security. God doesn't wear out on us; doesn't grow rusty and useless; doesn't grow outdated, like the last computer we owned. When the old securities fail us, God is and will be there for us. God is the rock we stand on when all around us is sand.

Advent finds us in a different place this year, whether others can tell it or not. Once again we hear the far-off voice of John the Baptist reaching out to us, becoming present to us. First, he calls us to repent think things over; do an inventory of our lives; make the necessary changes that we have been putting off. Like what? Repent from our sins, of course! But also repent from letting God slide to the periphery of our lives; for having made God a second-class citizen in our personal world. Repent from having treating our faith like a routine, an old habit – same old, same old. Repent from habits that hurt others and rob us of full life. Repent from being preoccupied with ourselves and having only a marginal interest in the wellbeing of others. Repent from a form of despair that says, "I'm too old to change." "That's just the way I am."

First, John calls us to repent and then reminds us this Advent that we are not on our own in our attempts to reform. God has taken note of our situation, as Isaiah reminds us in our first reading, and wants to come to our help – again. It's like going to "Weight Watchers" because we want to lose weight and need support. Or, like going to an A.A. meeting, or another healing program, because we are locked into destructive patterns and need help and a community of support to break them. The Baptist names the one who want to help us, Jesus, who will empower us with his Spirit.

“Out there” – there’s the noise of business going on; signs about sales, “30%-50-% off all items.” There is a lot to distract us and cause us to forget who we are and Who is important to us. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit we can soberly look at our lives and make the necessary changes that will draw us closer to God and help us more faithfully live in God’s ways.

#### CORRECTION:

For the feast of Christ the King, in advertising the new CDs for Year B, I wrote, “This Sunday begins a new liturgical year.” It should have read:

NEXT Sunday (1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent) begins a new liturgical year. Thanks to those who caught that mistake, it was the first mistake I have ever made in all my life!!!

#### QUOTABLE

It is an adult Christ that the community encounters during the Advent and Christmas cycles of Sunday and feasts: a Risen Lord who invites sinful people to become the church. Christmas does not ask us to pretend we were back in Bethlehem, kneeling before a crib; it asks us to recognize that the wood of the crib became the wood of the cross.

—Nathan Mitchel, quoted in, *LITURGY WITH STYLE AND GRACE* by Gabe Huck and Gerald T. Chinchar. (Archdiocese of Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1998, page 97. Paper, ISBN 1-56854-186-4.

#### BOOK REVIEW

We have published a new book review on our webpage of,

**Where the Pure Water Flows: The New Story of the Universe and Christian Faith**, by Margaret Galiardi, O.P. (Amityville, NY: Homecoming, Inc., 2008).

Go to <http://www.judeop.org/index.htm> And click on “Book Reviews.”

#### FAITH BOOK

*Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.*

**From today’s Gospel reading:**

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God....

[This is what John the Baptist proclaimed]: “One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

**Reflection:**

John the Baptist announces that the promises God made through the prophets are being fulfilled. It is, the Baptist tells us, “the beginning of the Good News.” Jesus is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and a new way of life is being offered to people stuck in their sin and old patterns of living. While the gospel has a beginning, it has no ending, for it continues to be good news in each generation, offering those who hear it a new way of living, empowered by Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit to us

**Advent is a time for dreaming big dreams, and so we ask ourselves:**

What changes must I make in my ways of acting and my ways of thinking as I prepare for the Lord’s coming?

In what new places will I look for the arrival of the Lord this Advent?

**JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD**

***“Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.”***

*(Isaiah 40:1)*

**NO ROOM IN THE INN**

Advent is a time of year when preparations, decorations and open doors to family and friends are stressed. It is a time of year when as Christians we retell the story of Mary and Joseph seeking a place of shelter and safety to bring the Christ Child into our hurting world. It is a time of year when those ***without* housing suffer deep emotional and physical deprivation.**

“Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. And giving shelter to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving to Christ.” *Dorothy Day*

***NOT ENOUGH AFFORDABLE HOUSING***

“The Catholic Church has historically urged the federal government to meet our nation’s promise of a decent home for every American family. ...homelessness

and inadequate, substandard housing destroys lives, undermines families, hurts communities, and weakens the social fabric of our nation. Despite our efforts-and the efforts of so many others - **there is just not enough affordable housing available.** We must put in place a sustainable source of funds to build affordable housing.” (*US Catholic Bishops, April 18, 2002*)

### **Did you know?**

1. Many who come for financial help to Sacred Heart’s “Door” are facing imminent eviction with no hope of earning enough for rent and no hope of finding other more affordable housing. These needy brothers and brothers and sisters of ours receive “*comfort*” as well as some help to avoid eviction.
2. Fewer than 1 in 3 households who are eligible for Section 8 Housing Vouchers receive one.
3. In order to afford housing and not spend more than 30% of their income on rent, an individual would have to work 40 hours at \$16.31 an hour. The current minimum wage is \$6.55 an hour and few minimum wage workers can find full-time employment.

*(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)*

### ***CHRISTMAS CARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES***

*Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:

- Jimmy Mc Neill                      #0507467    (On death row since 7/15/03)
- Jeffrey Neal Duke                      #0113234    (9/6/03)
- Linwood E. Forte                      #01330102    (10/8/03)

----Central Prison    1300 Western Blvd.    Raleigh, N.C.    27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

**“First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year B.”** Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**“Liturgical Years A, B and C.”** Reflections on the three-year cycle, with **Year B** updated.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage:

[www.preacherexchange.com/cd.htm](http://www.preacherexchange.com/cd.htm) and clicking on the “First Impressions” CD link on the left.

2. **“Homilias Dominicales”** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) Or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP at the above email address.

## **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below.

Make checks payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thanks, and “blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., [FrJude@JudeOP.org](mailto:FrJude@JudeOP.org).