

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

LECTIONARY #21

READING I Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

Comfort, give comfort to my **people**,
says your **God**.
Speak **tenderly** to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her
that her service is at an **end**,
her guilt is **expiated**;
indeed, she has received from the hand of the **LORD**
double for all her sins.

A voice **cries** out:
In the **desert** **prepare** the way of the **LORD**!
Make **straight** in the **wasteland** a **highway** for our **God**!
Every **valley** shall be filled **in**,
every **mountain** and hill shall be made **low**;
the **rugged** land shall be made a **plain**,
the **rough** country, a broad **valley**.
Then the **glory** of the **LORD** shall be **revealed**,
and **all** people shall **see it together**;
for the **mouth** of the **LORD** has **spoken**.

Go up on to a high mountain,
Zion, herald of glad tidings;
cry out at the top of your voice,
Jerusalem, herald of **good news!** >>

Isaiah = i-ZAY-uh

These words from God offer consolation as well as the images of a brighter future. While joyful, the tone of this reading is tempered by compassion. Begin with an emphasis on the words “comfort” and “tenderly.” Accentuate the words of contrast throughout the reading to show the literal and metaphorical results of God’s mercy.

Bring some vigor and energy to this sentence.

Zion = Zi-uhn or Zi-ahn

There are options for today’s readings. Contact your parish staff to learn which readings will be used.

READING I The Baptism of the Lord concludes the Christmas season and transitions us to Ordinary Time by reflecting on the purpose of the incarnation. Christmas made us aware that God was doing something decisively new through the person of Jesus Christ. Today’s readings offer more clarity to Jesus’ identity and mission and prepare us for Ordinary

Time’s further definition of what it means to believe in and follow Jesus.

Isaiah 40. Today’s first reading is from Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), a collection of prophecies directed at Israel in Babylonian exile and coming two centuries after Isaiah of Jerusalem. By this time, Assyria has fallen, Babylon is teetering, and God is preparing ascendant Persia to send his people back to their land. Second Isaiah’s message of comfort, consolation, and encouragement displaces the judgmental rhetoric of First Isaiah (chapters 1–39). Isaiah’s name and role as God’s

spokesman disappears, and the Lord commands the stage.

In today’s reading, the Lord issues a series of commands: “Comfort, give comfort,” “Speak tenderly,” and “proclaim.” These commands are addressed to a plural “you” and likely indicate members of the divine council (angels and messengers). It is their task to comfort, speak, and proclaim the message of God. The comfort they offer is more than solace. Rather, it opens Israel to unimagined possibility, even as it dashes the power of Babylon. Three descriptions of Jerusalem’s punishment justify this comfort:

Judah = JOO-duh

recompense = REK-uhm-pens

The mood here returns to comfort, rest, and care. Make this transition deliberately.

Isaiah = Ī-ZAY-uh

God's pleasure in the chosen servant is the foundation of this reading. Highlight the words revealing this pleasure.

Note the unexpected qualities of God's chosen one. Pause briefly after each phrase in this captivating section.

Fear not to cry out
and say to the cities of Judah:
Here is your God!
Here comes with **power**
the **Lord GOD**,
who **rules** by his strong arm;
here is his **reward** with him,
his **recompense** before him.
Like a **shepherd** he **feeds** his flock;
in his **arms** he **gathers** the lambs,
carrying them in his bosom,
and **leading** the ewes with care.

Or:

READING I Isaiah 42:1–4, 6–7

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

Thus says the LORD:

Here is my **servant** whom I **uphold**,
my **chosen** one with whom I am **pleased**,
upon whom I have put my **spirit**;
he shall **bring forth justice** to the nations,
not crying out, **not** shouting,
not making his voice heard in the street.
A bruised reed he **shall not break**,
and a smoldering wick he **shall not quench**,
until he establishes **justice** on the earth;
the coastlands will **wait** for his **teaching**.

she has served her time, the price of her sin is paid, and she has suffered doubly. The reading then describes the plan for the implementation of the sharing of God's comfort and message; a pathway will be created to ease their return home. The details of the highway reflect the practice of creating roads for processional victory events, highlighting the victory of a king and the gods. Thus, Israel's vindication will reveal the Lord's glory and all shall witness it.

At this point, a member of the divine council issues more commands ("Go up," "cry out," "Fear not," and "say"), now to a

prophet identified as the "herald of glad tidings." Pointing to God's imminent arrival, the herald's message is striking: the Lord God is both a conquering hero and a gentle shepherd who embodies majesty and mercy. The fact that the Gospel accounts of John the Baptist that precede Jesus' baptism employ this passage from Isaiah points to God's definitive victory in the person of Jesus.

Isaiah 42. One of the most enigmatic figures in Second Isaiah is the person called "my servant." Isaiah 42:1–9 is the first of four songs/poems that describe this ser-

vant of the Lord. The songs leave the identity of the servant ambiguous, and scholars have offered various identities. Some point to the unnamed prophetic herald mentioned earlier; most identify the servant as the people of Israel. Christian tradition sees the servant as Christ, anticipated in prophecy. Regardless of the identity, one assertion remains constant; whereas Isaiah 40–41 showcased the Lord's resolve on Israel's behalf, the song of the servant asserts that God's work will be accomplished by a human agent.

The tone shifts here. Pause after the word “teaching” in the previous sentence to create a space for the assembly to notice this change. Emphasize the words that illustrate the new reality that God’s people will experience, shown here in bold.

**I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice,
I have grasped you by the hand;
I formed you, and set you
as a covenant of the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes of the blind,
to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.**

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 104:1b–2, 3–4, 24–25, 27–28, 29–30 (1)

R. O bless the Lord, my soul.

O LORD, my God, you are great indeed!
You are clothed with majesty and glory,
robed in light as with a cloak.
You have spread out the heavens
like a tent-cloth.

You have constructed your palace upon
the waters.

You make the clouds your chariot;
you travel on the wings of the wind.
You make the winds your messengers,
and flaming fire your ministers.

How manifold are your works, O LORD!
In wisdom you have wrought them all—
the earth is full of your creatures;
the sea also, great and wide,
in which are schools without number
of living things both small and great.

They look to you to give them food in
due time.

When you give it to them, they gather it;
when you open your hand, they are filled
with good things.

If you take away their breath, they perish and
return to the dust.

When you send forth your spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.

Or:

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 29:1–2, 3–4, 3, 9–10 (11b)

R. The Lord will bless his people with peace.

Give to the LORD, you sons of God,
give to the LORD glory and praise,
give to the LORD the glory due his name;
adore the LORD in holy attire.

The voice of the LORD is over the waters,
the LORD, over vast waters.

The voice of the LORD is mighty;
the voice of the LORD is majestic.

The God of glory thunders,
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”
The LORD is enthroned above the flood;
the LORD is enthroned as king forever.

The passage may be divided into two parts: verses 1–4 and verses 5–9. The first parts, included in today’s reading, identifies the servant as the chosen one in whom God delights and upon whom God’s spirit has been placed. This description calls to mind the words of God the Father in the accounts of Jesus’ baptism, one of which will be proclaimed in today’s Gospel reading. The task of the servant in Isaiah, who is upheld by God, is to bring forth justice. In contrast to Babylon, who shouted, broke, and quenched Israel in servitude, the servant will facilitate justice through vulnera-

bility and a reordering of social life and power. The servant’s mission may include a universal outreach (to the nations and coastlands), but it is more likely directed toward Jews scattered among the nations and awaiting reintegration.

The second part of the passage, some of which is included in today’s reading, describes how the Lord called, formed, and set the servant in place. The victory of justice involves the servant as a “covenant of the people, a light for the nations.” How each term is related to the victory of justice is unclear, but they may point to the ser-

vant effecting a reordering of the world’s social relationships, thus bringing those on the margins (the blind and prisoners, for example) to the center of a newly constituted covenant community. This overall description of the servant is in keeping with the other songs of the servant in Isaiah: the servant is willingly vulnerable for the sake of the vulnerable, the larger community, and even for the well-being of the world. With this description in mind, it is clear why this text appealed to the evangelists as they described Jesus’ baptism and early ministry.

Titus = Ti-tuhs

The first sentence has three main parts: God's grace saves and trains us, we wait in hope for Christ, and Christ's self-gift inspires us to do good. Keep these in mind as you set up your pacing and pauses.

blessed = BLES-uhd

Four verses are missing between these two sections of the lectionary reading. Nevertheless, do not take a long pause before the word "When," because the second half of this reading complements what has come before. Read with a warm tone.

The "bath of rebirth" refers to baptism. Accentuate "rebirth" and "renewal," as these words illuminate the Spirit's gifts of new life and cleansing from sin.

READING II Titus 2:11–14; 3:4–7

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to Titus

Beloved:

The **grace** of God has appeared, **saving all** and **training** us to **reject** godless ways and worldly desires and to live **temperately, justly, and devoutly** in this age, as we **await** the blessed **hope**, the **appearance** of the **glory** of our great God and savior **Jesus Christ**, who **gave** himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to **cleans**e for himself a people as his **own**, **eager** to do what is **good**.

When the **kindness** and **generous love** of **God** our savior appeared, **not** because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of **his** mercy, he **saved** us through the bath of **rebirth** and **renewal** by the **Holy Spirit**, whom he **richly** poured out on us through **Jesus Christ** our savior, so that we might be **justified** by his **grace** and become **heirs** in hope of **eternal life**.

Or:

READING II

Titus. Scholars often question the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), but there is little doubt that the letters are related to one another. Each promotes doctrinal and social stability by recommending virtue and good works. Through exhortations to good behavior, warnings against vice, recourse to household codes, and clarifying creedal statements, these epistles encourage the spiritual well-being of the fledgling communities.

Introducing a household code for different members of the community (Titus

2:2–10) and a list of virtues and vices, Paul directs Titus to "say what is consistent with sound doctrine" (2:1). This sound doctrine is found in two creedal statements (2:11–14 and 3:4–7) that form today's reading.

While keeping the initiative of God and the action of Jesus Christ our savior in the forefront, the statements reveal the effects of the saving action on the past, present, and future. In the past, the Christians were delivered from lawlessness, cleansed by the "bath of rebirth," renewed by the Holy Spirit, and justified by grace. In the present time, having become heirs, they are trained

to "reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly" as they wait for the blessed hope of Christ in glory. In the future, they will behold the fullness of Christ in glory when they enter into eternal life. All of this was, is, and will be accomplished by the kind, generous, and grace-filled love of God and not because of any righteous deeds done.

Acts. The highly theological Acts of the Apostles is the second half of Luke's Gospel. In Acts, Luke describes how Jesus' ministry is continued by his disciples and how Jesus himself becomes the message

READING II Acts 10:34–38

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

Peter proceeded to speak to those **gathered** in the **house** of Cornelius, saying:
 “In **truth**, I see that **God** shows **no** partiality. Rather, in **every** nation whoever **fears** him and acts **uprightly** is **acceptable** to him.
 You know the word that he sent to the **Israelites** as he proclaimed **peace** through **Jesus Christ**, who is **Lord** of **all**, what has happened **all over Judea**, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, **how God anointed Jesus** of Nazareth with the **Holy Spirit** and **power**.
 He went about doing **good** and **healing** all those oppressed by the devil, for **God** was **with** him.”

Cornelius = kohr-NEEL-yuhs

Those gathered to hear this message are devout God-fearers, but they have yet to know the truth of Christ. Peter welcomes them and puts them at ease. Look out at the assembly here.

Emphasize “peace” and “Lord of all.”

Judea = joo-DEE-uh or joo-DAY-uh

The concluding section is almost list-like in grammatical structure, but each phrase communicates an essential part of Jesus’ salvific work. Read with a steady pace, mindful of the powerful story compressed into these few lines.

Notice the contrasts: John and Jesus, baptism with water and baptism with the Spirit and fire, and ordinary washing in water and the extraordinary voice of God and movement of the Spirit.

John knows who he is and who Jesus is. Say his words with confidence.

GOSPEL Luke 3:15–16, 21–22

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

The people were **filled** with expectation, and **all** were **asking** in their **hearts** whether **John** might be the Christ.
 John answered them all, saying,
 “I am baptizing you with **water**, but one **mightier** than I is **coming**.
 I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals.
He will baptize you with the **Holy Spirit** and **fire.**” >>

proclaimed by them. This is very evident in today’s reading, which is drawn from the story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–49).

The story of Peter and Cornelius begins when a devout and God-fearing centurion named Cornelius, who is in Caesarea, has a vision instructing him to send for Peter, who is in Joppa (10:1–8). For his part, Peter also has a vision that leads him to go to Cornelius’ home (10:9–33), where he preaches the Good News (10:34–43). As Peter speaks, the Holy Spirit falls upon all present, and they are baptized (10:44–49).

Today’s reading is the first half of Peter’s message of the Good News. It contains two fundamental points. First, Jesus has now become the heart of the community’s message. Highlighting God’s presence in the salvific actions of Jesus, Peter describes Jesus’ baptism and anointing “with the Holy Spirit and power” and the good works and healings Jesus did. Second, Peter realizes that central to the Good News he shares is the fact that being acceptable to God is not based on ethnicity or the observance of certain religious customs. Instead, it is based on upright behav-

ior and fear of the Lord, that is, not fear as in a servile anxiety, but rather as in awe and utter reliance upon God. Cornelius is a prime example of someone who is acceptable to God, not because of his ethnicity or religion, but because of his attitude toward God and the way he expresses this in his actions (see Acts 10:1–2).

GOSPEL It is noteworthy that the Gospels report public confusion regarding John the Baptist’s identity in relation to Jesus. For this reason, Matthew has John question whether he

At the word “After,” make a brief return to a narrating voice. Starting with “heaven was opened,” begin to build a sense of awe.

Resist the urge to take on a booming voice for God’s words. Rather, use a stately pace, accentuating the identity of Jesus as beloved Son and God’s pleasure in him (shown in bold). Give the lines space to be heard.

After all the people had been baptized
and Jesus also had been **baptized** and was **praying**,
heaven was opened and the **Holy Spirit** descended upon him
in **bodily** form like a dove.
And a **voice** came from **heaven**,
“**You are my beloved Son**;
with you I am **well pleased**.”

should baptize Jesus (Matthew 3:13–15), while John’s Gospel has the Baptist testify that Jesus is the Son of God (John 1:19–34). Luke’s account of John the Baptist’s ministry concludes in today’s reading, with John answering the speculation that he might be the Christ by declaring that a mightier one is coming. Following those verses, Luke briefly notes that Herod took offense at John and had him imprisoned (3:19–20, not included in today’s reading). The fact that John is imprisoned, and thus removed from the action as Jesus comes onto the scene,

sets the stage for Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism.

In spite of the logical question “How could John baptize Jesus from prison?” Luke does not deny that Jesus was baptized by John. Rather, he avoids any mention of John to keep the focus on Jesus, the main actor on the stage of salvation history. Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism takes a medium position between the fully public (Matthew) and fully private (Mark 1:9–11) versions. Noting that Jesus prays throughout the baptism—Jesus at prayer is typical of Luke—the descent of the Spirit is public (as

in Matthew), but the divine voice is private (as in Mark). Luke joins Matthew and Mark in drawing upon the Old Testament to identify Jesus: “You are my beloved Son [see Psalm 2:7]; with you I am well pleased [see Isaiah 42:1 and today’s first reading].” Now knowing who John is (a voice who baptizes with water), and who Jesus is (the mightier one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, as well as the beloved son and the one who pleases God), Jesus’ public ministry can begin. S.L.