

My senior year of high school, I was chosen to represent Iowa at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in Livermore California - for two weeks we learned how to use the supercomputers that were there - put another way, someone thought I was way smarter than I am

This was first time I was flying commercial since flying from South Korea when I was adopted at age 2 and half

This was before 9/11 so people not flying could go all the way to the gate - oh my gosh, my mother was a mess - she was crying - I was flying from Des Moines, Iowa to San Francisco - however, my mom was worried about my layover in Denver - I ended up having to transfer from gate B2 to gate B4 - literally my two gates in Denver were right next to each other - all that worrying my mother did was for nothing - I'm told that's what a mother's job is: to worry

Even so, there is something good and right about having everyone home - this is what makes Christmas so great for some and so hard for others - there is a sense that we should be surrounded by family - and when we're not due to divorce, death, family members going to the other grandparents, there is a sense of loss

In our first reading from Baruch, God is giving the Israelites hope - God is saying that the city of Jerusalem, the capital and religious center, would become great again - God will again allow Jerusalem to shine with splendor - that all of her children would come from the east and the west to worship once again - the people had been scattered because enemies had led them away to distant foreign lands - but God will gather them once again

As I have mentioned before, as Catholic Christians we believe this is symbolic - we believe that the new Jerusalem is the Catholic Church - we believe and know that God has invited not just Jews from the east and west, but everyone the world over to worship Him in the new Jerusalem, the Catholic Church

It is here in the Catholic Church, here with Jesus, here in the Eucharist that we find everything Baruch talks about - we find God leading us with joy by the light of His glory - it is here that we find our ultimate family - it is here in the Catholic Church that we gather as brothers and sisters, with Jesus our brother, with God the Father, with Mary our Mother

Satan, our enemy, leads us away, but if we allow God, He will bring us back

Is it not a blessing to be here at Mass? - "yeah, right Father - you know how much shouting and screaming went into getting us here?" - trust me - that just proves to our children all the more how important it is that we gather as sons and daughters of God the Father, as brothers and sisters in Christ every week

It is such a blessing to gather with you - as the response to the Psalm says, God has done great things for us - thus we are filled with joy

And God is not finished with us - if He was, we would not be here - this is what St. Paul is saying to the Philippians - St. Paul says that he is confident that God who began a good work in us will continue it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ, until the day of Jesus' second coming

St. Paul says that he prays we may increase in knowledge and perception so that we can discern what is truly of value

One thing that is definitely of value is spending time reading the Gospels on our own - obviously not to tune out during Mass, but so that we can even better understand them when they proclaimed to us in Mass - why is this of value? - because the Gospels are human history - the Gospels are not written like your history text books you had in high school - but they are human history - as Christians we believe the Gospels are the climax of human history, of salvation history

As I have mentioned before, I am very blessed to have been to the Holy Land, to Israel and Palestine twice in my life. Sometimes I think subconsciously we read the Gospels the same way we read fiction - one of the gifts of having been to the Holy Land is you quickly realize that the Gospels really are history - that they happened in time and space. This is exactly what St. Luke is doing here at the beginning of the third chapter, today's Gospel reading - St. Luke puts the context of John Baptist's appearance in the region of the Jordan within real human history - St. Luke puts this appearance in the context of the leaders in the area.

It gets a little fuzzy for us, but a reader of Gospel at the time it was written would have known exactly the time St. Luke was referring to.

So what was John the Baptist doing near the River Jordan, an actual physical river in Israel 2000 years ago? - John was calling people to repentance - why? - to prepare a way for the Lord - if we do we will see the salvation of God.

This is still true 2000 years later - God is gathering us as a Church each week to call us to repentance - it is in this repeated gathering and calling to repentance that we see the salvation of God.

I mean this literally - when we gather each weekend for Mass, one of the first things we do is the Penitential Rite - after the opening song, the sign of the Cross, and the greeting, I ask us to take a moment and reflect on our sins - then through the Confiteor ("I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned...") and/or the Kyrie ("Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy.")

After we have thought about our sins from the past week, said we are sorry, asked for His mercy, then I ask God's forgiveness for us when I say, "May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to life everlasting."

Once we have repented of our sins and received forgiveness and mercy, we are ready to proceed with the rest of the Mass - when we have prepared the way of the Lord in our hearts through the Penitential Rite, then we are ready to receive and see the salvation of God, especially in the Eucharist.

If they can, when a person is dying they receive the Eucharist for the last time as part of the Last Rites - in this case receiving the Eucharist has a special name - it called Viaticum - which of course is Latin - but it literally means "food for the journey"

We know from John, chapter 6, that receiving the Jesus in the Eucharist, body, blood, soul, and divinity are directly connected to our salvation.

By gathering and repenting as a community at the beginning of Mass is preparing for the work of our salvation through the grace of God

Two thousand years ago, John the Baptist was calling men and women to gather around him at the Jordan River and to repent of their sins - if they did, they would witness the salvation of God

God calls us to gather at Mass, repent of our sins in the Penitential Rite, and receive Him in the Eucharist - if we do, we will witness the salvation of God in each other

So I pray that this Advent and Christmas seasons are filled with gatherings, Mass included, that repentance, forgiveness, a preparing the way for deeper receptivity to God's grace in hearts happen again and again - may we witness God's salvific work in each other this season Advent and Christmas season - as St. Paul says, we are confident that God who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion