

In some cultures like one of my country, when a member of a family dies, the others put a scarf on or a fabric around the neck, which are most of the cases; purple to mark that the family is in mourning. The whole family and the neighbors stop working in the farms for seven days. They take the fabric off which is a signal that the mourning comes to an end and wear the new clothes. Wearing new clothes signals that the family begins a new time or new life. It is the same thing in the first reading we have just heard.

The prophet declares that it is now time for Jerusalem to exchange her robe of mourning and misery for a brilliant new mantle. Her new cloak is spun from justice and glory from God. If she despaired for her children, thinking God had forgotten them, the prophet insists, "They are remembered by God." In the gospel, there is a similar invitation to a new beginning announced by John the Baptist.

The narrative starts on an ominous note, as John's ministry is set against the backdrop of the Roman imperial rulers. Luke is not simply displaying an interest in history by naming Tiberius Caesar, the emperor; Pontius Pilate, the governor; Herod, Philip, and Lysanias, the tetrarchs; and finally, Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests who colluded with the Roman authorities. He is reminding his hearers of the omnipresent imperial power that kept the inhabitants of Palestine in fear and grief at many levels. He foreshadows the terror of John's execution and of Jesus' crucifixion by introducing Herod and Pilate before these two prophets have even spoken their opening words.

In this context, we hear John's invitation not only to turn away from personal choices that impede God's coming but also to collective repentance and a turn toward divine mercy. Any desire for revenge, any attempts to try to retaliate with violence, must give way to forgiveness on the part of the victims. This forgiveness invites repentance on the part of the offenders. Using Isaiah's words, John first speaks in imperatives: prepare and make straight the way. But then the verbs shift to the passive voice, implying that it will be the Coming One himself who will do the filling in of the valleys and leveling of the mountains, straightening out winding roads, and smoothing the rough ways.

For them and for us, his coming does not eliminate these challenges along life's path but fills us with saving joy, justice, forgiveness, and mercy as we open ourselves to the great things God has done and continues to do for us. Advent is a time of Gospel light. It is our annual wake-up call to look at the season to deeper realities and to keep our lit lights.

The call of Advent can seem like John the Baptist's voice in the wilderness but it is a call to real life and real truth.