

**Look to the East**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (C)**  
**(Bar 5:1-9; Lk 3:1-6)**

“*Arise, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights and look to the east*” (Bar 5:5). As in the days when the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert, so today the task of Advent is to “look east.” John went throughout the region of the Jordan, which is east of Jerusalem, to prepare the people for the Messiah. It was from baptism at his hands that the Messiah came to his people. As mankind looks to the east each day in hope of the rising sun, so mankind must keep its focus on this coming of the Lord.

The idea of “looking to the east” has found its way into the English language via the word “orient.” Orient is a noun meaning “east,” and a verb meaning “to face the right direction.” To look to the east means to the correctly orient yourself, to the Lord. When our lives begin to face a direction that does not lead to God, we become “disoriented,” without spiritual bearings, lost. Catholics must never be disoriented, we must always face east, disposing our lives for the coming of God.

Throughout her history the Church has symbolically kept this tradition of facing east by building her churches along an east-west axis. Simply by entering a Catholic Church and facing the altar one is made to “face east.” The glory of the rising sun is particularly dramatic in these churches around the time of the spring equinox – around Easter – when the eastern sun floods the church intensely. With the upheaval of the 1960s, most churches are no longer built with Advent symbolism of facing east, and priests no longer celebrate Mass “*ad orientem*,” that is, facing east together with the people. Instead of looking to God and his coming, we now look to ourselves. It has been a very disorienting time for the Church, and we need to recover the traditional practices with their scriptural symbolism.

Thank God our parish church was built before this time, and is correctly oriented! How beautiful it is when we approach the altar at Holy Communion to receive the Lord in the Eucharist, that he *literally* comes to us “from the east.”

There is one other time we also “face east” as Catholics, and that is when we are buried. Tombs in the cemetery are aligned on the east-west axis, with the headstone on the western side. Thus, if the corpse were to rise up, it would be facing the east. This is what it means to die and be buried “in the hope of resurrection.” For indeed the corpse will rise up from that place on the last day, and it will be “from the east” that the Son of Man will come in his glory.

At Mass and in the tomb, we look to the east. In life and in death, we orient our lives toward God. This is the task of Advent: to make sure our lives are

correctly ordered, that we are not disoriented; that we are firmly grounded in faith, firmly active in love, and firmly facing in hope the only road that leads to heaven.

With regard to this road, the prophets give us the second important spiritual task of Advent: “*prepare the way of the Lord.*” We often speak of “the road that leads to heaven,” and Jesus himself speaks in this way when he describes the difficult path that few find. But it is more accurate to understand this road that leads to heaven as “the path by which God comes to us.” Our task, with God’s help, is to remove the obstacles to His coming.

If you go to Jerusalem and look east, toward the region of the Jordan where John was baptizing, you will see that it is a desert wilderness, and it is very rough, mountainous terrain. The difficult road coming up to Jerusalem from Jericho and the Jordan, travelled so often by pilgrims, is made famous in the Bible by Psalm 23, and the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the great prophets of Advent. Filled with mountains, valleys and canyons, and rough winding paths, it symbolizes the tortuous path to the human heart that God must follow in order to enter our lives.

If we long for God’s coming, we must: “*Prepare in the desert a highway for our God*” (Is 40:3). “*Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth*” (Lk 5:3, Is 40:4, cf. Bar 5:7).

During Advent we must examine that obstacles that prevent us from enjoying God’s peace. Though they may seem to be immovable mountains, with faith even mountains can be moved.

We must examine the valleys that cause us to experience darkness and sadness, the situations that take away joy. We must evaluate the crooked sinful paths, the spiritual detours we so easily take, and whatever situations take away the zeal by which we should move directly and persistently in the one direction of heaven. And we must evaluate the rough paths, whatever situations cause us not be gentle and kind in our dealing with others.

John preached a baptism of repentance. In no uncertain terms, he challenged people to repent and undertake the great work of reforming their lives for the Messiah. 2000 years later the challenge remains the same.

God on His part spares no effort in order to come to us. The problem exists with the terrain of our hearts. Therefore, during this Advent, let us “look to the east,” and “prepare the way of the Lord!”