Dec 9, 2018 | Second Sunday of Advent (C)

Bar 5:1-9
Ps 126:1-6
Phil 1:4-6, 8-1
Luke 3:1-6

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

One of the major themes of today’s readings appears to be road repair. In very moving imagery, Baruch describes the return of the once-exiled people to the newly restored city of Jerusalem and, as is fitting when dignitaries visit, the roads must first be repaired: “every lofty mountain [is] made low. And …age-old depths and gorges [are] filled to level ground.” This same image is used by Luke when he describes the ministry of John. He too requires that: “Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low.”

These are not descriptions of preparation of any ordinary dignitary. Both passages speak of the coming of God. Baruch looked forward to the return of Israelites who were scattered because of exile. They are now gathered together and God leads them back home. This is a story of restoration, of rebuilding, of a second chance. Luke identifies John as the precursor of Jesus who will once again call the people together and bring them into the embrace of the reign of God, which is the reign of justice and peace. It only seems right that in both situations adequate preparation are made.

In Philippians, Paul too speaks of the coming of God. However, this coming is neither the Israelites’ return to Jerusalem nor Jesus’ entry onto his ministry (nor of his birth, for that matter). It is the day of Christ Jesus, the day of ultimate fulfilment. Here the preparation is much more difficult than road repair. This preparation requires a life of love and good works, a life of purity, blamelessness, righteousness, seeking justice, and being nonviolent peacemakers. Such is the way we prepare for this final coming of God.

It seems that Advent is the time for preparing for various comings of God. One commemorates an historical event, others describe spiritual realities. We certainly await Jesus’ birth, but our Advent preparation must be deeper than the commemoration of a past event. Being born as one of us means more than he became human; it means that he became part of the material world, interconnected with all of material creation. But even the celebration of that reality is not enough. Today’s readings tell us that he did not come simply to be one of us; he came to gather us together and to restore us, to rebuild us, to give us another chance.

So which coming are we anticipating? All of them. While we surely look forward to the celebration of the Incarnation or Jesus’ coming in human form, Advent readings would have us reflect on salvation, his coming to restore us. Actually, God has already arrived in the restored Jerusalem of Baruch, and on the banks of John’s Jordan. The profound mysteries of Incarnation and salvation tell us that the saving love of God is already with us. It is up to us to be open to it.

In a sense, it is not so much that God comes to us as it is that we turn back to God. This was the point of the road repair; this was the point of John’s baptism of repentance. This is the point of Paul’s exhortation to righteous living.

Dianne Bergant, CSA, is the Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP Distinguished Professor Emerita of Old Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago