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Columnists

Prophets proclaim time for change

By Father Albert Shamon
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 1:1-8; (R1) Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11; (R2) 2 Peter 3:8-14.

Last Sunday, the first of the Church year, the Church did some goal-setting. The end of Mark's gospel (Chapter 13) pointed out plainly and simply that the goal toward which we all are heading is judgment — therefore, the succinct admonition to "get ready!"

Having done so, the Church settles back and returns to the beginning of Mark's gospel for the rest of the year to teach us how to get ready for the judgment.

Though Mark speaks of John the Baptist in this first chapter, John is not the main focus of his writing; rather, it is the "one more powerful than John — Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Mark tells his readers right away who Jesus is.

First, He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One.

Secondly, this Jesus is "the Son of God." He is the one foretold by the law (Exodus 23:20) and the prophets Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1). The law and the prophets predicted that a messenger would herald the coming of the Lord. Mark sees John as that messenger, and Jesus as that Lord.

In the first reading, God sent a prophet, a second Isaiah, to prepared His people for the end of the Babylonian captivity and their return to their homeland, Jerusalem. This was good news! God would lead the exiles home like a victorious military leader or a shepherd, the prophet wrote.

"A voice cries out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord! Fill the valleys, level the mountains, make the rough ways smooth, reveal the glory of the Lord!'"

Isaiah's proclamation was a consoling message. Israel had waited for 70 years for the end of her exile. But between Babylonia and Palestine stretched a wasteland, a desert not unlike

Journey to a new kingdom

By Cindy Bassett

I, Claudius, chief servant of King Herod of Judea, do hereby claim that the events I describe below are the entire truth. Even though I risk my own death by setting forth this story, I can no longer remain silent about what I have witnessed. I hope that by reading my story, others will come to know the truth as well.

My tale begins in Jerusalem. A large crowd had gathered in the center of town to read a new law that was being posted. "By order of Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome, a census of all citizens of the nation is decreed," the law stated. It went on to explain that every citizen was required to return to his ancestral birthplace for this registration. "No doubt the emperor intends to increase our taxes," a bystander observed.

As soon as I returned to the palace, I told King Herod of the new law. He was not surprised. "It is clearly the emperor's right to do this," he replied.

"Yes, but are not the Hebrews already taxed to their limit?" I asked. "To impose such a burden only serves to crush their spirits."

King Herod eyed me warily. "And what do I care about the Hebrew spirit? These are strange words from you, Claudius. You must learn to check such unseemly feelings, especially when you have benefitted so much from taxes," he said, waving to the well-furnished room.

"I'm sorry, your majesty," I said. "It's just that I fear an uprising against the government if the Hebrews are pushed too far."

"We could easily crush such an uprising, as the Hebrews are most aware," the king said, his eyes flashing angrily. "Besides, the Hebrews have nothing to be unhappy about. Since I became king, I have rebuilt Jerusalem and restored their temple. I must be careful or the emperor will think my heart lies in the wrong place!"

There was little chance of that, I thought to myself. King Herod had, indeed, undertaken intensive building projects throughout Judea, but it was naive to underestimate the king's ruthlessness. He would destroy anything that stood in his path to Rome and greater power.

About that time, a great phenomenon occurred. A new star had suddenly appeared in

A Word for Sunday

the one they once had crossed out of Egypt. However, the prophet assured them that every obstacle, high or low, would be cleared out of the path of the returning people.

Mark sees the coming of Jesus as the beginning of a third and final exodus of God's people. The exodus from Egypt and Babylon were from physical slavery. The new exodus of Jesus would be from a far worse slavery — that of sin. To prepare for the leader of this exodus, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets was sent — John the Baptist.

John's message was repentance, *metanoia* — a change of lifestyle. At Medjugorje, Our Lady also called for change or *metanoia*. For instance, we have made television the center of our homes, and put God in the corner. Our Lady says "Change — put God back in the center of your homes and put television in the corner?"

Here is one suggestion to help you do that. Why not say the rosary as a family right after supper, before you even start the dishes? Why not tune in on Father Cirrincione's beautiful rosary program?

The Church has eliminated all but 70 indulgences, and has left only five plenary indulgences in the revised Enchiridion. Guess what? A plenary indulgence is granted for reciting the rosary in a family group. That's what the Church thinks of the family rosary. I sincerely hope that she will not be a voice crying in the wilderness.

The Bible Corner

the heavens, and all of Jerusalem was buzzing about it. The star was magnificent both in size and radiance. Some people said it was a comet or a shooting star, but this theory seemed unlikely, as the star reappeared in all its splendor each night. Others believed it to be a new planet. But the most persistent claim was that this star was the herald of an important event about to take place in the world.

Many of the Hebrews said the star was sign that the long-awaited Messiah was coming. This Messiah was expected to bring a new kingdom of peace to people everywhere. I even started to hope that this story was true.

The king was becoming disturbed by the Hebrews' theory about the star. "Call in my astrologers!" he ordered. The astrologers studied the matter and then informed Herod that prophets many years ago had predicted that a new king of the Hebrews would be born in Bethlehem. According to the prophets, this ruler would be a descendent of King David and would rule a kingdom that would never end. The star, the astrologers concluded, could be an omen of this king's birth.

"Claudius, I have thought of a plan," the king boasted after hearing the astrologers' report. "The timing of this census is most fortunate. Tomorrow I am sending you to Bethlehem where you are to check the census records and see that the officials take note of all who register as descendants of King David!"

When I set out early the next morning, the brilliant star was fading into the light of dawn. But it had already cast its mark on my soul, and I determined to find the new kingdom that would never end.

To be continued . . .
Scripture reference: Matthew 2:1-6; Luke 2:1-4; 2 Samuel 7:8-16; Micah 5:2

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