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# You do not know the day or the hour...

The walls of Jerusalem rose like cliffs from the dark Kidron Valley. Across on the slopes, at their camp near the top of the Mount of Olives, Jesus and the disciples sat watching the shadows of evening slowly climb the fortress walls.

Below them, on the hillside, the Garden of Gethsemane had been swallowed into the quicksand of darkness. Only the weak light from one small campfire gave a faint tracing to the entrance of the garden's grotto.

Andrew sighed and leaned back against the trunk of one of the trees. "Looks like they're closing the gate over there," he said.

"Yes, I saw guards posted." Philip noted.

Jesus looked over at the two disciples, leaning on his right elbow: "Just as they will be on watch tonight, so must you Andrew and you Philip. Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come."

Misunderstanding Jesus, Andrew asked, "Tonight? Should I stay awake all night?"

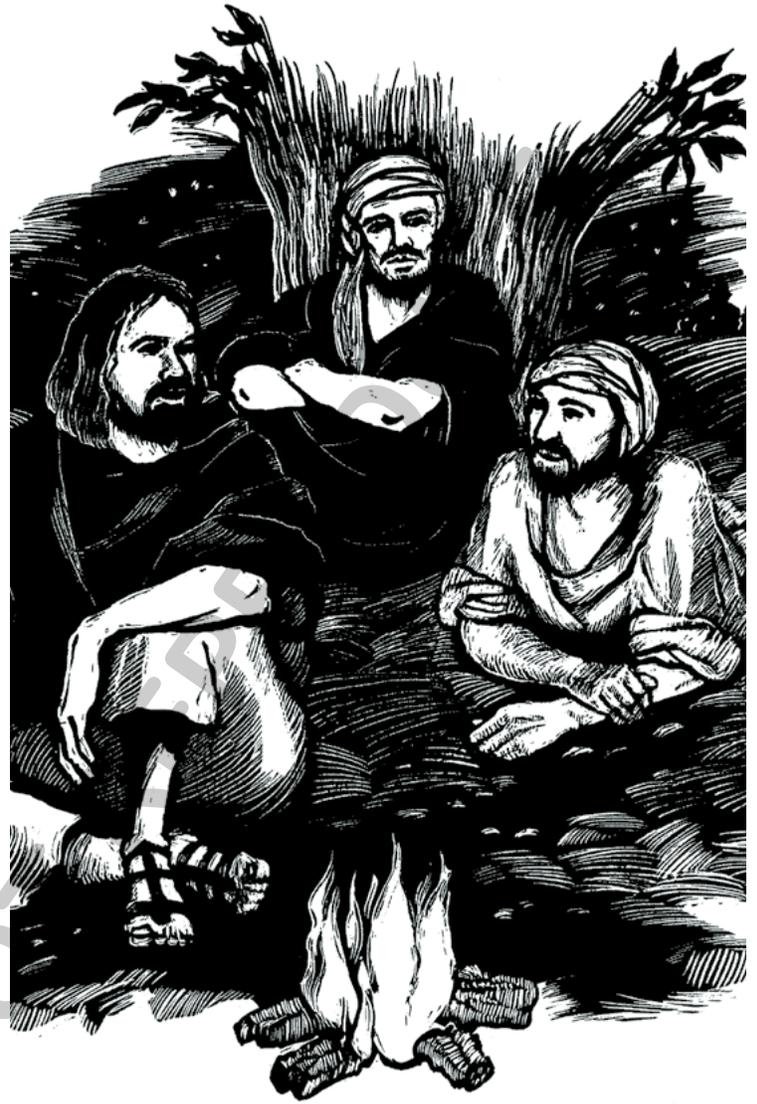
Jesus explained he was talking about a greater image, the coming of the Son of Man. The other disciples moved closer.

"It is like a man traveling abroad," Jesus began. "He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own task; and he orders the man at the gate to watch with a sharp eye. Look around you! You do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether at dusk, at midnight, when the cock crows, or at early dawn."

"With so many thieves on the road at night," Andrew said, still missing the point, "the master would not likely travel at night. If he did, the guards would be caught by surprise."

Jesus smiled patiently and looked around at the others faces, then back to Andrew. "That's an excellent point, Andrew," Jesus said, adding: "Do not let him come suddenly and catch you asleep."

No one said anything for a moment. They turned



their attention back to the torches moving along the top of the walls of Jerusalem.

Jesus concluded: "What I say to you, I say to all: Be on guard!"



Our lives are lived on the edge. We are balanced between life and death. Anything could happen at any moment. Nothing could be truer than Jesus' words: "You do not know when the appointed time will come." We are left with this Gospel warning to be ready for the end of the world, remembering also the message of last week's Gospel: to love and care for one another is to love and care for Jesus.

# A prophet speaks

“Look, he’s doing it again!”

The young man jabbed his friend with his elbow and pointed at the wild man standing waist-deep in the Jordan River.

An old man with a walking stick was wading toward him. When the river man lifted his arms in welcome, the wind caught his tangled black hair. It exploded into a lion-like mane. The wild man plunged the old man’s head under water and the walking stick went floating away in the current.

Across the Jordan, on the other bank, dozens of onlookers were watching the spectacle.

The river man with the wild hair looked like a prophet, and many thought him to be one as well. He was wearing a piece of camel hide tied around his waist with a strap. Students of the law may have noted that clothes of camel hair were also worn by the great prophet Elijah.

“What is he doing, trying to drown that man?” the other youth asked. Another old man nearby heard the question and tried to explain..

“It is not a drowning, lad. The man is being washed clean. He is being purified so that he may become one of us Jews.”

The three of them watched as the baptized man regained his footing and staggered to the river bank with John. Someone had retrieved the walking stick and gave it to the shivering old man.

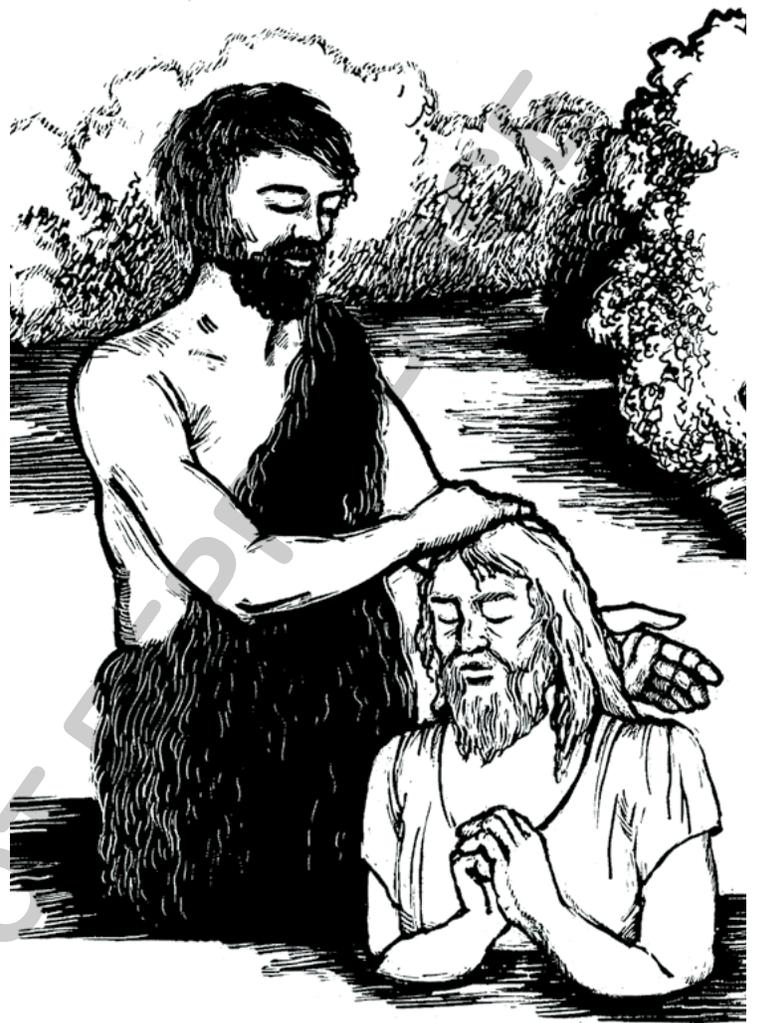
At the edge of the water John lifted his arms again and shouted in exultation.

Someone called from the crowd. “Are you the prophet, the Messiah, the one who is to come?”

There was a silence. People waited, hearing only the peaceful sound of the river flowing by.

John’s voice then rolled like thunder over the desert place: “The man who will come after me is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to bend down and untie his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

A gust of hot wind filled their ears with its humming. When the wind dropped to a whisper all they could hear was the sound of the river chattering over the shallows.



Who is the prophet in your life? All of us have experienced someone who was like John the Baptist—someone who was a herald in the deserts of our lives. Was your prophet a family member, a friend? Perhaps it was someone speaking through the pages of a book. Possibly there were many prophets—a priest, a nun, deacon or brother. Whoever it was, remember them. They announced Jesus to you.

On this second Sunday of Advent we can recall that joy which filled our hearts when we first received the Good News that Jesus was truly in our midst and that he was baptizing us with the bright fire of the Holy Spirit.

# The voice in the desert...

From higher up on the bank of the Jordan River, the crowd of curious people looked down at him. He was like a wild man, wrapped in camel skin. He sat alone on a rock at the river's edge. They stood a long time, watching and waiting.

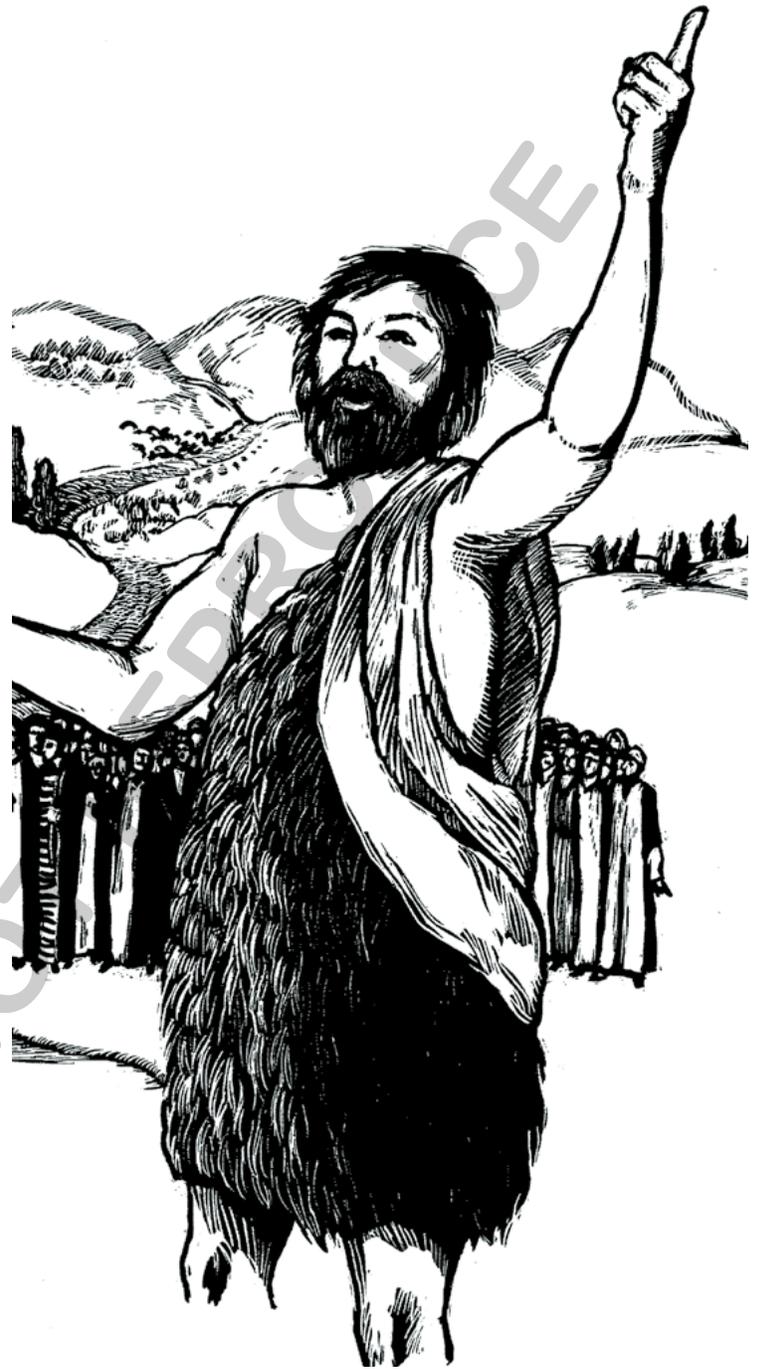
John felt both warmth and cold. The morning sun was good on his back, chasing away the last chills of the night. His feet felt the cold water flowing over them. He stared down into the river flow, lost in thought about the one who was to come.

John's eyes were moist with emotion as he recalled the powerful revelation that God had bestowed on him that distant night ago. John remembered waking in the darkness to find the presence of God warm upon him.

The caress of the morning sun reminded him of the warmth that had filled him that night as the holy darkness resolved to dazzling clarity. Squinting into the astonishing brightness, John was filled with peace and understanding. He would announce the coming of the Light of Christ into this world. He would be the voice in the desert, crying out the good news of the one who was to come.

John stood up and turned to look up at the people on the river bank. The sunlight made a silhouette of the silent crowd looking back down on him. He knew they had their questions. Some were no doubt sent by the Pharisees to prod him with two-edged questions. He knew others thought he was a madman. John had seen their smirks before. He had heard their whispers and deriding laughter. Yet, John was filled with the power of God. The fiery spirit of God was upon him and in him and would soon stand before him in the waters of this very river.

From the water's edge he bellowed up at them: "Make straight the way of the Lord!" His words shattered the morning silence. John felt his heartbeat quicken as he stalked up the riverbank toward the crowd. He would make them believe!



The Third Sunday of Advent used to be called "Gaudete Sunday" (Rejoice Sunday). It is truly a Sunday to rejoice in the news that John proclaims to the crowds. "There is one among you whom you do not recognize."

We, like John, are called to proclaim the coming also. We are invited to tell every one we know: "Rejoice! Rejoice greatly! Our Lord comes!"

# Once upon a time in Nazareth

The first stars of the night twinkled down on the young girl. She clutched the hem of her apron and held it to her cheeks where the tears were still running. Her hands trembled. Her heart was pounding so hard in her throat she gasped to get enough air to breathe.

The man, a foreigner, had just vanished! He burst into nothing, disappearing in the blink of her eyes. Where he had once stood before her, there was now only the night sky.

But he had been there! Mary had seen him and he had spoken to her. His words echoed in her mind—strange words, telling her that God had chosen her...that she would give birth to a king...and that the kings' name was to be Jesus.

The striking image of the man was still fresh. His face had seemed to glow with its own light. Mary had been alone, taking her evening walk. When she looked up she noticed him standing there on her footpath. He smiled at her and softly said, "Rejoice!"

Mary was still stopped where she was on the pathway, frozen in fear. She told herself to run, but she was unable to move.

The peaceful silence that settled over Nazareth began to calm Mary. She realized she was not going to continue her walk. Nothing was ever going to be the same again. Still trembling she broke free and began to run back along the footpath that led to her house.

Mary burst through the open doorway almost running into Anna and Joachim who were lighting the lamp together. Anna looked up in surprise. "Back so soon?" she asked.

Mary could not speak. Her words caught in her throat and suddenly she was sobbing as her mother embraced her. Waves of unexplainable joy crashed like mighty echoes over Mary's heart.

"What is it, dear?" Anna asked as she stroked her



daughter's long hair.

As if the sky would explain for her, Mary pointed out into the starry night. A bright star winked back and Mary knew it was the stranger. Yes, it was all true!

"Oh mother..." she began



Today, all these years later, we share the Annunciation again. We, like Mary, are called to believe. We are called to know it is all true. We are summoned by Gabriel, now, in our life and time, to rejoice! For unto us a Son will be given and the government shall be upon His shoulders and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.



Christmas - Luke 2: 1-14

## The happiest night of the world

When the night sky began to streak with light, nine-year old Aachim scrambled on his hands and knees toward his sleeping flock. In the growing light the terrified shepherd boy huddled next to Old Moto as if his favorite sheep could protect him.

The dome of night looked like a pitcher of goatsmilk was being poured into its bowl. The whiteness spread like wispy clouds driven on strong wind. The pale light thickened and began forming into the shape of a woman with outstretched arms. Suddenly the milk-light snapped to life and an angel floated above Aachim. Her brilliant white robes billowed about her.

Aachim pressed harder against Old Moto, his eyes fixed on the vision above him. The angel was young and her face was beautiful. Her eyes brightened when she

smiled at him. In that moment Aachim realized there were now hundreds of angels filling the sky. Softly at first, but growing louder, their voices began to sing out “Glory to God.” The chorus filled the sky and poured over the hills like soft rain.

The angel spoke to Aachim, saying “You have nothing to fear. I come to proclaim good news to you! I am bringing you tidings of great joy to be shared by the whole people. This day in David’s City a savior has been born to you, the Messiah, and Lord. Let this be a sign to you: in a manger you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes.”

In the light from the skies Aachim could see all the way down the hills toward Beth Lehem where the tent of his family was pitched. Leaving the sheep behind he ran, almost stumbling, down to his tent. By the time he reached the tent the angels had dissolved back into the starry night sky. Aachim’s mother and father were already up, standing in front of the tent looking up at the stars. One star burned as bright as the moon and together the little family walked in its direction.

A crowd of shepherds had already gathered at the entrance to the animal manger behind Beth Lehem’s inn. Aachim and his parents worked their way to the front of the crowd to see. Just as the angel had said, there was a woman holding a newborn baby. Their faces were golden in the flickering torch light. Aachim heard one of the shepherds share what he had learned. “They are Joseph and Mary from Nazareth. The child’s name is Jesus.”

They all stood staring at the scene. It was just as the angel had said. Aachim wondered what the angel’s strange words meant when she said this child was to be a savior, a messiah?

Aachim felt his mother’s hands gently rest upon his shoulders. He looked up into her brimming eyes and saw the forming tears. A warm breeze caressed them as they stood helplessly in awe and wonder.



Each Christmas the world stands helplessly in awe and wonder among the shepherds who came to the manger on that first night. To wonder at the ways of God who chooses to be born unto us as a little baby. To marvel that God loves us enough to live and walk among us—a God who would die for us.

In this child is the great gift of eternal life. What more could we ask? It truly is the “Happiest Night of the World!”

# The Knowing

It was the Jewish month of Abib, and in keeping with the tradition, the family of Jesus set out for Jerusalem where in the great temple, Jesus, as firstborn son, would be consecrated and dedicated to God.

Joseph held the cage containing the two doves and smiled down at Mary, holding their son in her arms.

“I wish that we could give a year-old lamb as the offering,” Mary said, shifting little Jesus to her other arm. She adjusted her shawl to shield his eyes from the sun. Looking to Joseph for an answer, Mary noticed a weariness in his face. They had been walking steadily since early morning.

“Because we have no flocks of our own,” Joseph explained, “these doves are acceptable. One will be for adoration and the other for a sin offering.”

Mary smiled silently as she thought about tomorrow. Ahead was the immense city and the lofty temple rising up on the mount. Joseph noticed Mary looking, wide-eyed, up at the fortress walls and the towers beyond. Jerusalem was exciting— the Great Temple, the merchants and markets, soldiers and strange people from foreign lands. Tonight Joseph and Mary and Jesus would sleep within its walls.

At the temple the next morning the Saducee priest Simeon eyed the trio coming toward him. He felt tired, wondering why he had risen so early and come to the temple this day. Simeon also noted that they only had caged doves for the offerings.

“Good morning Rabbi,” Joseph said. “We want to dedicate our firstborn.” Mary drew back her shawl so that Simeon could see the child.

Simeon looked down on the little face and a rush of realization swept over him. This was the special child, the one foretold. This was the Anointed of the Lord, the Messiah!

Simeon remembered his years of waiting. He remembered his times of doubt. He remembered the clear promise of the Spirit, now fulfilled before him.



The old man reached out to claim the child. Mary placed little Jesus in Simeon’s arms and the old Rabbi’s eyes brimmed with tears as he gently embraced his God.



We, like Simeon, have heard the promise and we also wait for the coming of the Lord in our lives. The wonder-child waits too. Waiting for us to keep our appointment in that special time and place when we come to “the knowing.”