

- As we begin our second week of Advent, our readings draw our attention to two of the prophets in our mural: Isaiah and John the Baptist.
- The Prophet Isaiah is depicted in the far right panel of the mural with a large saw in his hand, the instrument of his martyrdom, while St. John the Baptist is the one figure in the mural, outside of Christ the Paschal Lamb, who looks directly at us.
- With his gaze directed out to us, St. John is inviting us to look to the Paschal Lamb, an invitation reinforced by the banner he bears, which says, “Ecce Agnus Dei” – behold the Lamb of God!
- Throughout the four weeks of Advent, we read a great deal from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, just as we do today with our first reading.
- Today Isaiah speaks to us the prophesy of the coming Messiah with immense hope. We are told first that the coming Messiah will be of the lineage of Jesse, who was the father of King David, and that the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him.
- Indeed, Isaiah tells us that the Christ will possess what we know as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, that He shall judge with justice, and that He will strike down and slay the ruthless and wicked.
- Even more than that, Isaiah prophesies that the coming of the Messiah will be such a powerful event that it will reorder nature, such that beasts that were formerly predator and prey will live in peace with one another.
- Who can imagine such incredible things as wolves being guests of lambs, or leopards lying down with kid goats, or that calves and young lions could browse together? And yet that’s the incredible hope we find embedded in this magnificent passage!
- Even beyond that, Isaiah tells us that, just as water covers the sea, so shall the earth be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. And the Messiah – the “root of Jesse” – will be like a signal or a light so bright and glorious that even godless Gentiles will seek Him.
- This is the great and hopeful sign of the coming of the Messiah for Isaiah: that the godless will become God-fearing!
- Very beautifully, in our second reading St. Paul makes reference to the Old Testament Scriptures, reminding us that what we read there is meant to give us hope! And he, too, references the Gentiles with the hope that they will come to know God’s mercy.
- You see, hope is one of the most important and powerful of the virtues. Truly, man cannot live without hope, for a life without hope is a life consigned to despair and death.
- Yet the right to hope for the coming of the Messiah is properly borne only by those who seek Him in integrity of heart, and so St. Paul holds out hope that even Gentiles might seek God and know the fulfillment of their hopes for mercy.
- Keep in mind that the term *gentile* was used in biblical times to describe any non-Israelite. But the true division between Jew and Gentile wasn’t on racial or ethnic lines. It was really more about one’s behavior toward the Almighty.
- Remember that the Israelites were governed by the Mosaic Law, which was a collection of over 600 precepts, including the 10 Commandments, as well as directives concerning morality, purity, food, feast days, marriage, property, and sacrifices, among other things.

- The Mosaic Law was meant to help shape the minds and hearts of God’s Chosen People and to direct their actions so that they might have rightly ordered relationships both with God and one another.
- The problem was that so many of the Jewish leaders kept the letter of the Mosaic Law without keeping its spirit! This is why we find good St. John giving the Pharisees and Sadducees a rough time in our Gospel story today.
- Many people from Jerusalem, Judah, and the whole region of the Jordan were going out into the desert to be baptized by St. John as they acknowledged their sins. But the Baptist admonishes the Pharisees and Sadducees because they lacked true repentance.
- He saw their lack of integrity. St. John knew that they were coming to be baptized by him not out of any sense of repentance, but rather because they wanted to be seen as holy by his followers in order to maintain their religious influence over the people.
- Thus St. John warns the Pharisees and Sadducees of their impending damnation if they do not repent in the face of the coming Messiah.
- Last Sunday I mentioned that in Advent we feel acutely the division that exists between those who know and love God and see in Him the measure of all things, and those who do not know or love God and who see man as the measure of all things.
- This division is a division that has existed every since the fall in Garden! The world has always been filled with both the God-fearing who love and trust God with integrity of heart, and the godless who love themselves and trust in man.
- We feel acutely this division, this tension, between the God-fearing and the godless now because Advent confronts us with the fact that God became man and was born for us as Savior, and that He will come again to judge the living and dead.
- If we believe that God, in His love and mercy, became one of us to save us from our sins, and that we will have to face Him one day as our Judge, then the witness of our lives should reflect our great love for such a gift, and our humble repentance for the ways we’ve failed to live up to this gift, if we are to hope in our salvation with integrity.
- While there’s an increasing number of people in our society who do not believe in these truths, and who do not fear facing a God of justice at the end of their lives, they are not the most destructive force in our society today. Nor will they be judged most harshly.
- The most destructive of people in our world, and those who will be judged most harshly when our Lord comes again, are the lukewarm who *do* believe these truths about Christ but who *do not* live their Faith with integrity. This is what we here must guard against!
- Both John the Baptist and our blessed Lord reserved their harshest condemnations not for godless Gentiles, but for the duplicitous Pharisees whose outward piety was betrayed by their lukewarmness of heart toward God.
- Think of our Lord’s words in Revelation: “I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” (Rev 3:15-16)
- So as we consider the beautiful and hopeful words of Isaiah today about the Messiah, let us not forget the admonition of St. John the Baptist that we must prepare the way for the Messiah in our hearts, making straight His paths by our repentance.
- Knowing that our entire lives should be one long preparation for our meeting with Christ on judgment day, let us live with true integrity by loving God and obeying His commandments, and by always begging pardon for the times we fail.

- May we not be godless or lukewarm, but truly be God-fearing people who love Him with integrity of heart so that our hope in Him may not be vain.