Reading 1  Isaiah 11:1-10
On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD, and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD. Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide, but he shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land’s afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra’s den, and the child lay his hand on the adder’s lair. There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD, as water covers the sea. On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.

Reading 2  Romans 15:4-9
Brothers and sisters: Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name.

Gospel  Matthew 3:1-12
John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:

A voice of one crying out in the desert,
Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.

John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
HOMILY

It was a few days before Thanksgiving, and Joe stopped by the local church to talk to the Pastor. He told the Pastor “I have a confession to make. I stole a turkey this morning on my way home from work.” The Pastor told him “That was a terrible thing to do.” Joe replied “Yes, I know that now … do you want it?” The Pastor replied “No … take it back and give it to the person that you stole it from.” Joe replied “I tried to give it back … but he refused it.” The Pastor told him “In that case you keep the turkey.” Joe thanked the Pastor and went on his way. When the Pastor arrived home later that day, he discovered that his turkey was the one stolen!

Please take about ten seconds, and think about three things that come to mind when you think about last Christmas season – three things that stand out so much that you remember them now, a year later <<< pause >>> OK – of only those three things that you remembered, who thought about the shopping experience you had, no matter how good or miserable it was? … How many remembered being with family, whether them visiting, or you visiting, or just enjoying family at home? … How many thought about the gifts you got? … Or the bills that came in? … Or the beautiful weather we had? Finally, and be honest, how many thought about something memorable with regard to your faith, that truly made last Christmas season stand out for you, that you will probably remember for years to come as something that brought you closer to God? … Now don’t feel bad about your response to that last one, because you may have done something, but it may have been overshadowed by other events on your mind. For example, we kicked off the Year of Mercy in Advent last year, and many of you came to the talk on God’s Divine Mercy by Fr. Mazur and Rick Paolini. Many of you walked in the gym for the Walk of Mercy. And many read the book given out at Christmas Masses and may have gotten a lot out of it. Many opportunities last year, and many more this year – such as Formed, which you heard about earlier – all geared to help bring us closer to God, to help us keep our focus … on God.

After all, we all know that Jesus is the reason for the season, but we may get bogged down by everyday events, or even extraordinary ones that get in our way of prioritizing the coming of Our Lord. The Hallmark Channel might have us believe that the Christmas season begins sometime in July, but the Church calendar sets aside these four weeks before Christmas each year, this time of Advent, to give us a special opportunity to spiritually prepare for this coming. It’s a great opportunity to renew our spiritual preparation for Jesus and the message He brought 2000 years ago and the message he brings to us every day of our lives – the Good News of our salvation! The Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Heaven – is at hand! It’s the message that John the Baptist brought to the Jewish people when he baptized them in the river Jordan through the desert of Judea. And the people responded – Wow! Did they respond! Matthew’s Gospel passage tells us: “Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.” John’s message was one of repentance – not just sorrow for sins but much deeper. Repentance demands change from the person – personal moral change – to return to God. And to best prepare for the Lord to enter one’s heart, the Gospel passage quotes from Isaiah, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” No detours, skip the distractions, avoid the side trips – make straight the way for the Lord! At the time that Isaiah line was written, the Jewish people had been captives in Babylonia and were set free.
to return home from their exile. The line from Isaiah noted a **physical return**, straight through the desert, from Babylon to Jerusalem, instead of the longer, more popular trade routes. Matthew saw John preaching a **spiritual return** to God through repentance, through change – avoid the detours, the distractions, the side trips that shift the focus from God.

So, what keeps us from having a straight path to meet Jesus, to greet Him fully at Christmas, and at all times? Think of all the major obstacles and distractions in your own life that keep that from happening this season, especially the ones that you can control. Think of all the voices that clamor for your attention, from advertising giants to local and world events to smartphones to meaningless time-wasters. And, who are the present-day John the Baptists that stand out in this world, helping to prepare others for the coming of our Lord? Let’s look at the straight path question first. Think of Our Lord being on the altar right now, and you being in the back, by the baptismal font, and you need to keep Jesus in your view to prepare yourself for Him to enter your heart. What obstacles block the path between you and Him? Take a few seconds to think about that. **<<pause>>** Maybe the obstacles are personal – perhaps anger or being upset over a personal relationship. Maybe they are from over-commitments to lesser-important items – continuous activities for the kids, for example. Maybe they are from the over-commercialization of Christmas. Or maybe the obstacles are just from a plain worn-out, low-interest in spiritual matters. And perhaps that’s where the answers to the second question help – where do you find the present-day John the Baptist … where do you find those who are preparing for the coming of Christ and who you can relate to … who speaks Jesus’ message to you. Many feel that Pope Francis, with his continued emphasis on mercy even after the Year of Mercy has ended, provides a voice in the desert of today’s me, myself and I culture – I encourage you to read one or more of his writings, and extend mercy to those around you. Many see those who emulate the example of Saint Teresa of Calcutta, such as Father Rick in Haiti, providing a voice in the desert of poverty and crime – I encourage you to check out his cause or those of similar ones, and help as you can. And many see those who carry on the Catholic Christian message through communications, such as EWTN and Catholic Radio, providing a consistently Catholic voice in the desert of misinformation, and bringing into the faith countless others either returning or recognizing the truth of the faith.

On the local level, perhaps you can see parish or community voices in the desert. Perhaps one of those voices can be yours – what keeps you from being a voice in the desert, one who sees the result that God would want done, one who prepares others’ hearts to receive Jesus, one who sees the face of Jesus in others and does something about it, because of your faith? For a personal goal and a takeaway from this homily, I invite you to choose one thing this Christmas season, one thing that will help make this season spiritually memorable – to begin, perhaps purchase a special ornament or another item and hang it on your tree as a reminder of this goal, and then somewhere else around the house after you’ve completed the goal, as a reminder of how well you did. Make this Christmas season, from this point forward, a spiritually memorable one that better prepares your heart for the coming of Jesus, so that when someone asks you a year or even ten years from now, what was special about this Christmas season, you can look at that ornament and have that answer right away.

And now, we prepare for our Eucharistic Feast, where Jesus will truly be at the altar among us.