

2nd Sunday of Advent, Cycle C
Baruch 5:1-9
Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
Luke 3:1-6
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Forty years ago, when I was in high school, football practice was a grueling experience. Day after day the coaches drove us to the ragged edge of exhaustion. Even on the most miserably hot, humid afternoons, no one thought to ask for a drink of water. To do so would have been seen as a sign of craven weakness. Among the many exercises and drills, I remember one in particular, called leg raises. We would lie on our backs with our legs together and stretched out straight. In this posture, we would raise our heels a foot off the turf, and maintain the position until our leg and back muscles screamed for relief. Sometimes the screaming was literal. I was a big strong kid with an outwardly placid disposition. Sometimes, during the leg raises, the head coach would jump up and down on my stomach, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Gordon, if you'd ever get angry, we'd never lose a game!" We hardly ever lost a game in any case, largely out of fear of what the coach would do to us if we did. I remember distinctly what it was like to troop back into the locker room after practice, the metal tipped cleats on our shoes clacking loudly on the linoleum. Then, after a grateful drink at the water fountain (nothing since has ever tasted as good), I would stand in front of my locker and drag my bloody, sweaty, practice uniform off my body. To remove the wet, bulky, shoulder pads was bliss.

I'm reminded of that experience by the first words of today's reading from Baruch: "Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever." The Church stands at the beginning of a new year. For many, the year just past has borne some resemblance to the football practices I've just described. We were bloodied and exhausted, but we carried on. We kept showing up, and we're still here. I've heard that young athletes today receive a "participation trophy" just for completing a season. Good for them. I think we *all* deserve a participation trophy for another year's faithful endurance. At least we get an Advent wreath. And we get the *season* of Advent – a fresh start.

Oh, there's still everything to play for, but we've made a good beginning. Paul's words to the Philippians are addressed to us as well: "I am confident of this, that the one who began this good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." "The day of Christ Jesus" – that's what we're playing for. We are motivated, not by the desire for a league championship, not by fear of the coach, but by love of the child whose birth in a manger we will soon celebrate – the one whose imminent arrival John announces in our Gospel. If athletes will strive mightily for a laurel wreath that fades, imagine what prodigies we will accomplish for love of him. But for now, in this holy season, we strip off our robes of misery and mourning and are wrapped in the cloak of the mercy and justice of God. We have come to the living water to be refreshed, so that we need never be thirsty again.