

Advent 2C
December 5, 2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

About this time every year we begin to hear, and/or ask, that common question: “Are you ready for Christmas?” For some, the answer to that question revolves around the great anticipation about putting up the Christmas tree, collecting presents for loved ones, and the excitement of parties, spending time with family and friends, and time off from work. For others, there is the real element of sadness as the season is a painful reminder of the loss of loved ones and/or other difficult transitions that have taken place in their lives since last Christmas that will make this go round quite different. For many others, the question speaks to the weeks of busyness of shopping, decorating, cooking, and cleaning, indeed, the challenge of getting it “all done”. Regardless of how we answer the question, no matter how many of the above categories might apply to us, or whether we carry with us our own unique answers to the question, the fact is we’re all operating with a road map that our secular world has slipped us and, as a result, we may be arriving at the wrong destination, that is, missing the real reason for the season.

That is why every year at this moment, on this Second Sunday in the Advent season, the three-year lectionary our church uses asks us to hear once again the cries in the wilderness of that wild-eyed prophet, John the Baptist. Whether we are hearing Matthew, Mark, or Luke’s version, it is always John the Baptist on this second Sunday in Advent and the point of these passages is that John the Baptist is not calling us to the celebration of Jesus’ birth in order to get THINGS ready by way of shopping and decorating and consuming increasing quantities of eggnog. Instead, he is calling us to make OURSELVES ready. While our world has come to call us to prepare for a time of merrymaking and excessive consumption, John announces that we are called instead to prepare for Christmas by making a highway in the world for the arrival of our God.

You see, John The Baptist cares not at all for our cherished customs at this time of year. Indeed, he has come to interrupt them. He appears in order to disrupt the patterns and habits of our lives.

And no, he is not a Scrooge or a curmudgeon. He comes to preach a message of hope and a message of promise. The Word of God is coming into the world to offer a whole new way, a whole new life, a whole new world. John points to that coming reality by proclaiming a baptism of repentance. He is echoing the promise first made by the prophet Isaiah:

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth”.

Sounds pretty dramatic! Furthermore, this is not simply a description of radical changes in topography. It is rather a description of the inner landscape of each and every human heart and soul willing to take John’s cry seriously. We can recount the crooked paths on which we have lost our way, and the rough places that we have stumbled over. With prophetic power and insight, John shares with us that, in Jesus Christ, God has entered into the world and God ’greatest desire is that, in this holy child, our lives can and will be different: the low places filled, the high places brought into our reach, the crooked made straight, and those rough places made smooth. We have reached a moment of “both and” – of what is by the grace of God and what could be in this world in our lifetime.

But there is one reality, one truth, and one practice, that is the key to these new possibilities: REPENTANCE. Repentance is the only on-ramp that we can take on to this highway in order for what could be to become what is. Not more tinsel or an increased number of gifts under the tree. REPENTANCE.

Repentance is how we prepare for the way of the Lord and the highway for our God. Human lives, changed and re-ordered, is the only way to comprehend this new God-given map. God does not come to us in the abstract. He becomes one of us, incarnate in a fellow human being. What child is this, we ask on Christmas morning. This child is the Son of God. And John the Baptist tells us that we must follow this child completely if we want to travel this highway Isaiah has proclaimed, for he has been sent to be our guide.

Now we don’t really like the word, “repentance”, do we? It seems to imply that we are “bad people”, and we need to be punished, and none of us like the sound of that!

Please remember that repentance is not first about condemnation and judgment, chastisement, guilt, or even remorse. In the New Testament, the greek word for repentance literally means turning one’s life around and heading in a new direction. And the U-turn of repentance involves both turning way from something and turning instead toward something or someone else.

Repentance truly understood on this 2nd Sunday of Advent begins with a deep and careful examination of our lives and identifying the patterns and habits of seeing, thinking, speaking, acting, relating, and living that we know deep down are contrary to the promise of Christmas, that God has come and is present and active in our world and hopes to find a place to dwell in each one of us. Repentance is a call to let go of the habits that distort our reality, impoverish our relationships, and ultimately diminish our ability to truly and fully love. Some sure signs that repentance is

required in your life and mine would include sustained bouts of anger, pride, fear, greed, the overwhelming need for approval, perfectionism, being judgmental, gossip, the need to control, the need to be always right, jealousy, and self-hatred. If they are there, affecting the way we see the world and how we interact with our neighbors, then our friend, John, is right. Repentance is necessary if we are to understand the true meaning of Christmas.

And insight into these symptoms is not enough. Identification is only the first step. We must then turn away from these old and corrupting ways of being, with God's help and by God's grace, in order to fully receive Jesus as our guide and allow his spirit to create new patterns and new ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, acting, relating, and living that acknowledge that our Messiah has arrived. As we turn more and more toward the love that the Bethlehem manger holds, then the nature of the gifts we receive at Christmas will change: Love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice, peace, wisdom, patience, beauty, hope.

Are any of these the gifts you would like to receive this year?

Of course, the practice of repentance is not just about the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Repentance is a way of life. It is a way of being. When we really stop to think about it, we realize that the way to Christmas is not through the mall or your favorite merchandiser's website. It is instead about traveling with that wild-eyed prophet out there in the wilderness calling all people to make a highway for our God. Christmas, through the practice of repentance, then becomes the fulfillment of a promise: "And all flesh shall see the salvation of our God". (Luke 3:6)

Amen.