

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent 2014 Advent 2B  
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When I was young, December always seemed like the longest month of the year.

Despite all the excitement and bustle of the holiday season, it seemed like Christmas would never get here. From the day after Thanksgiving, when the whole family would be involved in baking the first batches of Christmas cookies (and we were finally allowed to play Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians' Christmas album on the stereo), the focus on Christmas was intense, but the waiting was almost unbearable.

As an adult, though, Christmas comes way too quickly for me. There never seems to be enough time for all the visiting, baking, shopping, wrapping, card-writing, mailing, and decorating, and each successive candle on the Advent wreath seems a little bit more like a warning that days are growing short than the growing light of anticipation and hope.

And in today's Gospel reading, John the Baptist is reinforcing that adult perspective. He gives a stern warning that the days *are* growing short, and the time to prepare is now. And so we are reminded that Advent is not really a time of waiting, but rather a time of preparation, and not just preparation for the holiday, but preparation for the coming of Jesus into our hearts, our families, our communities and our world.

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’

Many of the people who went out into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist probably took him literally. After all, they were expecting the Messiah to bring an army to free Jerusalem from the brutal oppression of Rome. So of course they needed to make a straight and level road for that army to use as they marched on the gates of the city. Leveling the valleys and the hills; straightening out the bends in the road; were certainly needed: picks and shovels would be the right tools to hasten the coming of the Lord.

John, of course, corrects that idea. Repentance, turning away from what is broken in your life, is what is required, not road crews, because the Lord is actually coming to conquer your heart and not your city.

Things are not much changed since John the Baptist’s day, I think. Yes, I know – we all know – that Jesus did come, and changed the world in his coming, but that doesn’t stop Jesus from continuing to come, over and over, into our hearts and into our communities. And the path to get there is still full of twists and turns; steep hills of resistance and deep valleys of discord – we have plenty of work to do among ourselves and within ourselves to make a straight highway for the coming of the Lord.

And a lot of us still imagine that the one who is coming is different than the one who came – that Jesus will use force –spiritual, perhaps, and not military – to set things right, and he, not we, will do the heavy lifting.

But hoping for things to get better is not at all the same as repentance. Repentance is an action word – it means to turn around or turn away. And since it’s not very helpful to turn away from one less-than-helpful thing only to embrace another, let’s focus not on what we’re turning away from but on what we are turning toward. Think of repentance not so much in terms of turning away from your own sins and shortcomings (although it will certainly involve that) but as turning towards God. Or, better still, think of repentance as turning so that you are moving in the same direction that God is going.

And what direction is God going? Certainly in the direction of justice, of kindness, of love. God is always on the path to peace. And also always on the road to our hearts that John bids us make straight and level. So if we are heading in God’s direction, we are headed straight towards one another.

But how do we get on that path, headed in the right direction?

John tells us where the trailhead is when he calls his followers to “the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The key is that word “for,” which doesn’t , in this case, mean “in order to get.” John is not saying, “Repent so that you will be

forgiven.” That word “for,” in this case, means “because of.” We are to repent because of – in response to – God’s forgiveness, freely given, not to buy or earn it.

So repentance means living the life of the forgiven. Repentance means living as if we were confident of, and deeply grateful for, God’s love, rather than living in fear, trying to earn God’s favor.

Perhaps you already live that way. I know I try to, but my success is pretty sporadic. Moments of grace and confidence that briefly interrupt a life of busy anxiety. But oh, those moments! No doubt you have them too. Those times when the light seems to break into our day-to-day lives and we find ourselves in the midst of, say, a group with sudden clarity of purpose and unexplainable extra energy for the task at hand; or possessed of wisdom that doesn’t seem to come from us but which solves an intractable problem or unites people who could not, until then, find common ground. Times that, when you look back and describe them, make you start to sound like Mark’s gospel, where “immediately” is his favorite word: “Suddenly, everybody knew what to do.” “All it once it came to me.” “Right then, everything changed.” “In an instant, the world seemed different.” “From that moment on, my life was never the same.”

Repentance, trying to align our purposes with God’s intentions, opens us up to those kinds of moments more often. Maybe perfect repentance would lead to a life

of non-stop awe and wonder – a new kind of time when everything is “suddenly” and “all at once.” And perhaps that is as good a picture of eternity as anything in our experience – an infinity of epiphany.

But since none of us, I daresay, is perfect in our repentance yet, maybe we could spend a little of our Advent preparation time this week thinking about those moments of eternity we have experienced, and pondering what exactly it was about us that made us ready and able to recognize and embrace the flashes of holiness when they came. What, at that instant, made you receptive to either your own inner wisdom or that of someone else? What made it possible for your co-workers or friends or family to become united in spirit and purpose just then – how was it different – how were you different – than in the moment before? What cracked open in your heart or mind to let the light come in? And what can you do to make that opening wider?

We cannot control when God is going to break into our lives and present us with new possibilities of joy, love and peace. All we can do is widen the cracks that let the light in until they are windows, or better yet doorways. Or, to put it another way, we have no idea when the Lord will suddenly come knocking, but we can make the road to our door straight and level.

Amen.