

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 7, 2008 B

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus as recorded by Mark doesn't begin with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. Mark doesn't describe a night in which there was no room in the inn for a pregnant woman and her husband. There are no angels announcing good news of great joy to shepherds keeping watch over their sheep. And there are no astrologers from the East who follow a star in search of a newborn king. What Mark does, instead, is to begin the good news of Jesus by quoting from the prophet Isaiah the passage we hear in our first lesson. Mark gets right to the point of what he wants his listeners to know: the reign of God is coming and you better get ready! "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The message announced so long ago by the prophets of Israel is stirring anew through the voice and actions of John the baptizer. And it's not happening where one might expect this message to be heard, in the synagogue among reputable religious leaders. No, it's in the wilderness and on the banks of the Jordan River, where crowds of people from all walks of life were drawn to hear the message of a man who inspired and challenged them to get their lives in order. Confessing ones sins, stepping into the river, getting submerged and coming back up ready for a whole new life wasn't just a ritual religious act for those who came to the riverbank. It began a process of living more authentically the life God calls people of every age to live.

We can easily find ourselves distracted if we dwell on Mark's description of John's wardrobe and fat free diet of locusts and wild honey. It's easy to do, especially when the message cuts to the chase, as John's message does: repent, readjust your priorities, turn your life in a direction which puts you on a straight pathway to God. John's message is more about the future and less about the past. It's about living with hope, having a sense of expectation of what God can yet do in our lives and in our world.

Mark's gospel begins with a call to repentance. It's one of those biblical words we need to revisit from time to time, for it often doesn't have the meaning for us it had for others in times past. I can hear the voice of a theology professor of mine some thirty plus

years ago warning us students not to use religious language carelessly – words like repentance or redemption. In the words of Wendy Wright, a contemporary spiritual writer, "Repentance is not necessarily the gloomy and self-loathing practice it is sometimes made out to be. To repent is not to be confirmed in what that little voice within keeps whispering: that you are no good, that everything bad that happens to you is your own fault, that if only others knew what you were really like, they would cease to care for or be interested in you.

No.

True repentance begins with the felt knowledge that we are loved by God. We are children of God" (THE VIGIL: Keeping Watch in the Season of Christ's Coming, p. 41). Notice that she speaks of a 'felt knowledge' of God's love, which means to know not just with our heads, but to feel deeply in our hearts that God loves us with an unconditional love. Repentance, in other words, is more about being open to God's grace in the present and future than it is about a fear of judgment concerning our past. We can't relive our past. It's gone. We can't change it. But we can transform it by opening the way for Christ to come anew into our hearts and lives. God is coming to us, the scripture of Advent tells us, but we need to prepare the way. Through his message of repentance, John the baptizer encourages us to be open to new possibilities, to live in joyful expectation and hope of a future yet to be realized. I'm reminded this season of Advent, which celebrates the coming of Christ, of a sign I've seen outside of a church while driving in traffic. The sign said: "Let the miracle of Christmas find a place in your heart." Unlike many signs outside churches which make me smile or groan, this one gave me pause to ponder, "What is the miracle of Christmas? Is it the mystery of Jesus, the Son of God, born as a baby in Bethlehem, who has already come, or is it the Advent message of the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist, calling us to prepare the way for the Lord is coming? Is Christ here already or has he not yet come?

The here and not yet aspect of Christ's coming is an important part of the Advent message. It's a paradox which can also be found within the mystery of our own lives. It doesn't matter where in life we find ourselves, or what our age might be or what experiences we've had on our life's journey to date, we all have within us the

seeds of tomorrow. Each season of life contains within itself both the past and the future. Whether we like it or not, for better or for worse, the persons we are today are, for the most part, the persons we will be. And still, there's room for repentance, for readjusting our priorities, for turning our life in a direction which put us on a straight pathway to God. We are as much a paradox as is this season of Advent. Walter Burghart, a priest whose homilies I've always enjoyed reading, expresses this tension in an Advent homily he gave some years ago when he said the following: You are at once the same as you were yesterday and different. 'You haven't changed a bit' is not always a compliment; more importantly, it's never quite true. Not true of your flesh or your spirit; not true of your mind or your heart; your intelligence or your love. It's a soul-shivering paradox: You are now what you will be, and still what you will be is so much fuller, so much more completely you than what you are now. And so you will struggle, you will gasp for breath and shout for joy, you will be very vulnerable and unexpectedly strong, you will work and play, rock and roll, love and hate, hope and despair, ripen and wither – and through it all you will fashion ever more fully the person you already are. In a word, human living is an advent" (Walter J. Burghardt, SJ, Sir, We Would Like To See Jesus, "On Tiptoe of Expectation," p. 34.) The reality is that we are, at the same time, 'already' and 'not yet' the persons God created us in love to be. God is at work and miracles happen for those who live in hope and expectation of the coming of the Lord. This is a difficult time of year for many people who are hurting and in need of healing. The Advent message encourages us to not just endure today in the hope that tomorrow will be more tolerable, but to work through our struggles. Recognize the darkness where it exists in our lives but know that with all its limitations the stress and challenges of life bring us, today is pregnant with new possibilities. Repent. Readjust your priorities. Turn your life in a direction which puts you on a straight pathway to God. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Let the miracle of Christmas find a place in your heart.

Amen.

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