

“Make Straight the Way of the Lord”

I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’ (John 1:23)

“There was a man sent from God.” These understated words from today’s Gospel reading, carry a world of meaning. Here, we are given the humbling and hope-filled proclamation that God had acted in the human story. That He had moved to deliver a witness to the saving work He was about to do in Christ Jesus and to remove any doubt about the identity of this salvation sentinel we are plainly told, “His name was John.” Echoing the words of an inspired Zechariah who introduced his impossible son to the world, this modest announcement reveals a wonderful and most important Advent character.

You see, God sent John just as the prophets had proclaimed, and John’s role in God’s promised deliverance was to announce the coming of God’s Kingdom; to tell everyone to get ready for the arrival of God’s Messiah. In his own words from today’s Gospel reading, John’s job was “to make straight the way of the Lord,” and this message of preparation was very pointed. John didn’t encourage people that they could do better if they would just work a little harder. He didn’t check resumes or vet his audience, and he didn’t tell the people who flocked to the wilderness to get busy or improve their performance. No. In fact John’s Advent message was not motivational in any way. Instead, it was utterly destructive.

Don’t miss this! John preached a hard, harsh, and unbending message of rebuke. He came to hold up the Word of God and to show the people how far their lives and their hearts were from God. As the ultimate Advent witness, John came to condemn self-righteousness and pronounce judgment. In an absolutely essential function, John came to destroy the way of the world and in its place, make straight the way of the Lord.

Over the last few years, I was fascinated by the demolition of St. Joe Hospital. Living in West Central made the project easy to follow, so I would routinely brave the dust and drive by the site to watch the progress. Brick by brick and beam by beam the workers picked the old hospital apart, and it all culminated on November 3, 2022, as crowds gathered to watch as the north tower of the doomed building came crashing to the ground.

There was nothing gentle about this massive deconstruction project, and the equipment used to accomplish the work was powerful and violent. Pounding and pummeling, smashing and crushing, the workers were relentless as they destroyed the former building, and if you drive by the site today, you will see a piece of ground that bears no resemblance to the large hospital that used to occupy the now-level land. The old broken building had to be completely destroyed before anything new could come. And this is exactly the job of the John the Baptist, and this is precisely the point of Advent.

Along with Lent, Advent is one of two penitential seasons in the church year. It’s a time when God’s people are called to repentance. It’s a time when God’s Law is unleashed and through its proclamation, our human nature and the way of the world are destroyed. And we hate it! By our nature, we want to be justified in ourselves and we don’t want to hear the truth that we are corrupt. By our nature, we don’t really believe that our hearts are all that bad and we would much rather skip Advent and jump right into our holiday celebrations than hear about the destruction of the way we know and love...but God loves us too much to leave us in our way.

So, John's job as the Advent witness in the wilderness, and my job as your Advent witness today is to tell you that even the best of your works are worthless before God, and that your past performance means nothing, and that anything in this life that you have done for validation or held onto for hope is merely another example of the very idolatry that God condemns in the First Commandment when He says. "You shall have no other God before me." And this word of Law, this message of judgment, this declaration of destruction is not only meant for the unbelieving masses in the world...it's meant for you and it's meant for me! And it is absolutely the truth.

Things like high test scores and good reviews, big wins and generous raises don't matter in God's way. But not only that, we can also add to this list things like our knowledge of the Bible, or our church attendance, or our faithful stewardship, or even our love for our families. The point is that nothing we have ever done – or will ever do – contributes to God's favor. We stand before God completely bankrupt with nothing to offer Him except our sin, and once this Advent message has choked out our sinful nature—once this Word of God has demolished our way, then the way of the Lord can be established.

"There was a man sent from God. His name was John." And John's job, and the purpose of Advent, was to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. And this is always God's way. He destroys the sinful heart with the truth of His Law so that through the truth of His Gospel He can create a new and clean heart. He kills the old self-righteous man so that a new man of faith can be born. This work of God begins in our Baptism and as long as we live in our sinful flesh it never ends. Daily by His Word, He calls us to repent. And daily, by His Word, He kills our desire to be justified in ourselves. And daily, by His Word, He recreates us and raises us to newness of life, and just as He brought light into the world by His Word, He also brings life and salvation to our dead souls and this is the Word by which He creates: "You are forgiven."

God didn't look to see how well we did on some cosmic placement test, and He certainly didn't compare us to the other sinners around us, or even take a chance that we might have a spark of good in us. God didn't wait for us to come to Him in any way. Instead, as His Word said, God demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were yet sinners – fools and failures and enemies of God – Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). This is the way of the Lord that John came to make straight.

The message of Advent is not that we should get better or get busy, and this is no time to show God how qualified we are for the kingdom. Instead, Advent calls us to despair of our efforts and let go of our past performance, and die at the cross of Jesus Christ where everything has been done for us; or, in the words of the prophet, where "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain" (Isaiah 40:4). And there on the cross of Jesus, our burden is carried, our sin is punished, comfort is given, salvation is found and we experience the joy of our salvation. Today, you are free. Today, you are forgiven. And this is the way of the Lord. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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