

Second Sunday of Advent - C

St. Luke is very clever with how he begins this chapter of his gospel.

On the one hand, his introduction is very formal, starting with the bigwigs: the emperor, the Roman governor of Judea, etc. and working his way down the hierarchy until he gets to the high priests of the Jerusalem temple.

On the other hand, he points out that the Word of God has not come to any of them, but to a priest's son who is living in the desert, "off the grid" as we might say today.

Already we get the indication that something quite out of the ordinary is afoot. John is in the desert for something quite different than working his way up the ladder of power and influence.

The desert is a place of purification and inner examination, and that's what John is about, what he's offering. And it's that that God prefers above else.

John proclaims and offers a baptism of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That is an outer ritual meant to aid an inner process—one designed to bring about profound change.

Our word "repentance" is a translation of the Greek word, *metanoia*, which literally means "going beyond the mind."

Apparently, the mind can be part of the problem. Maybe there is something about the mind that holds onto sins; and there is something about going beyond the mind that lets go of sins.

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From my experience that sounds a lot like what I sometimes encounter in the confessional. A person is really worked up about something they have done, and they come to confession for forgiveness and absolution, but then it becomes apparent when talking to them that a missing part of the process is that they have not let go of their sin.

I have to remind them of the irony of it all when they ask God for forgiveness and hear the promise from him that they are forgiven when they are not even close to forgiving themselves.

Oftentimes, the sin, and it could be anything, has confronted their sense of how they like to think of themselves and forgiveness will not restore it. They are really looking for perfection, not forgiveness and would prefer to go back before the sin occurred, I guess, and be in that place before it happened—then they would not have to face the fact of their imperfection.

Perfection is something that exists in our minds. It's a great idea except for the fact that, for us, it is impossible.

So, it can happen that the biggest obstacle to our salvation is the mental attitude of pride which will not allow us to receive salvation from a source outside ourselves. We need to get beyond all that.

Going beyond the mind to let go of sins is not an end in itself, it is a work of preparation for the greater work that is God's to do.

The imagery of making straight and smoothing out stands for the removal of all obstacles. Whatever is

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needed to ease the Lord's arrival will be done.

Once we have allowed ourselves to receive forgiveness, by attending to the word of the Baptist, then we are in a position to hear the word of love that comes with the proclamation of God's good news through Jesus.

Without forgiveness of sins, people are not yet really open to receiving the Holy Spirit. John's highway is ultimately a path to let God get close, to make it possible to welcome Jesus as the Giver of the Spirit.

Ultimately, that's what we are about during a season of preparation such as Advent: To make ourselves ready, open to the greater work that only God can do.

For that to happen we have to let go, not only of our sin, but of those mental attitudes which are simply obstacles to the salvation that comes from God.

Advent is a good season to practice humility, which is rooted in the truth about ourselves. If we can get to that, God will find us much easier to work with.

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1. Luke's clever beginning: starts formally with the bigwigs; shifts to what's really going on: The word of God comes to a priest's son living in the desert.

Something out of the ordinary is going on!

2. The desert: a place of purification and inner examination.

John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins: an outer ritual mean to aid an inner process.

Repentance = *metanoia*, "going beyond the mind

3. The mind is often the battleground where we keep ourselves apart from God.

When we refuse to acknowledge guilt. "Denial"

"That's not like me."

Or where we refuse to be forgiven. Holding on to our sin even after we receive absolution. Lack of self-acceptance. Would rather perfect ourselves so that we don't have to rely on God.

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4. Denial and Perfectionism are both mental attitudes; need to be put behind us.

Metanoia: going beyond these mental attitudes so as to be open to the work that God is doing

5. Imagery of making straight and smoothing out: removing all obstacles.

Repentance only an initial step. The best is yet to come and is God's work to do: forgiveness for the sake of filling us with the Holy Spirit.

6. The basic approach of Advent: Making ourselves ready, open to the greater work that only God can do

A good season to practice humility, acknowledging the truth of who we are before God.

Humility makes us much easier for God to work with.