

Second Sunday of Advent – Year B

Have you ever been in a situation where someone has wronged you, then asked for forgiveness, but in the process never really forgives themselves? Even after you have forgiven them, they continue to beat themselves up about it, won't let go of it, and, in the process the relationship gets weighed down.

They are so centered on themselves and their shortcomings or moral weakness that they lose sight of the fact that you're trying to move forward and inviting them to do likewise.

I think a key development in our life of faith is when we are able to move from a self-centered awareness of the wrong we've done to a more complete picture of our relationship with God.

That relationship has to be based on the fact that what God is doing for us is always the bigger part of the story than how we have responded. Admitting that is one of the best ways to move out of a self-centered approach to repentance to one that is better situated to embrace the saving action of God.

That theme is front and center in today's Gospel. John the Baptist's call to repentance and "to prepare the way of the Lord" is really about a lot more than making a list of our transgressions against the 10 commandments. He's calling the people of his day, and us, for a change in our way of thinking.

The Gospel tells us that everybody was flocking to John at the Jordan to confess their sins and go through John's cleansing baptism.

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But the crowd's confession of sin wasn't at all like a recitation of the list of sins they had committed, and it was not something they did in private.

Instead, it was a communal and enthusiastic public demonstration about the idea that life could be much better than it was. Basically, they were confessing that they had settled for less, but that they were now ready to embrace the promises that God had made for fullness of life and happiness with him as their God.

What brought the confession about was a dream about how things could be. The prophet Isaiah offered people a vision of a world without divisions and barriers. The “mountains and valleys” of Isaiah's prophecy stand for all those things that keep us apart from God and from one another, even our own unwillingness to accept forgiveness.

What are the things in our life, and in the life of our world that we've already written off as too difficult to change? Where are we settling for less? Where have we given up? What would it take for us to root out our bad habits and negative ways of thinking, to be open to a change of heart and to re-embrace God's promises to us?

The Second Sunday of Advent invites us to dream the big dream, and not to settle for how things seem to have ended up.

We are reminded again today that God created us in order to share with us his own divine life—not just in the life of the world to come, either, but in this life. His plan for us is that we experience and share the joy

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of being part of a humanity at peace, smoothing out what divides us and rejoicing in the richness that comes with the many nations and cultures all streaming to the Lord's blessings.

That will never happen if we don't imagine it, cling to its possibility, and keep working for it.

If you are planning to celebrate the sacrament of penance and reconciliation this Advent season, maybe that could be part of your examination of conscience: Have I given up on God? Do I expect very little from him when it comes right down to it? Do I still trust in his promises?

The call to repentance that is appropriate especially in this Advent season is for us to let go of our puny expectations, and to give ourselves permission to dream the big dream.

The promise of forgiveness tells us that God will never give up on us and leave us trapped in our small, self-centered reality that has given up hope.

God is always seeing what is possible, where the way forward lies, and he keeps calling us to trust his lead.

That is a challenging message to embrace, but an invigorating one, too. Life with God is always an adventure. And to set out on that journey means we have to quit trying to save ourselves and humbly submit to the salvation that can come only from God. Give it a try this Advent. You have nothing to lose, really, and so much to gain.