

Sermon – Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3: 1-12

Our spiritual journey, like our physical life, starts when we are helpless and vulnerable. We need to be taught most things and we need help to grow. As we grow we become hopefully more open to learning and eventually we mature enough to fend for ourselves. The difference between developing physically and developing spiritually is that we can ignore our spiritual development but still survive physically.

People are however generally conscious of their inner spirit and many have a yearning for a life that is deeper than one based on the material offerings of the world. It is only a few who can truly change their lives from the inside out.

The decision to develop a spiritual life and to open up to a higher power, to God, is not a one-off decision. It is a decision that we need to make every day. Often we do this unconsciously but there can be times in our life where we make a very conscious decision to engage in spiritual practices and learning so as to be open and receptive to God working in us through the Holy Spirit. We need open hearts to receive that which God provides.

There is an old adage – *It is better to give than it is to receive*. For every gift given there is someone to receive it. Giving brings a lot of joy and a lot of that joy comes from our experience of seeing the receiver's reaction to the gift. If our gift is rejected or ignored we might be a little sad or annoyed. If our gift is well received then we might feel good and satisfied that the effort we put in to selecting and presenting the gift has made a difference to someone's life.

The same emotions are at play when God provides gifts for us. The most important gift was of his son Jesus Christ who came into the world to lead us to redemption and salvation. God also provided the gift of other people earlier in time who acted as signposts pointing people back to God. These were Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Joseph, Ruth, Moses, the prophets, and lastly John the Baptist. When we acknowledge these God-given gifts, and receive them with joy and enthusiasm, we tap into the hope of a newer, richer life that Jesus offers us.

The season of Advent is a season of preparation. The church's observance of Advent stands in stark contrast to the world's observance of the lead up to Christmas. From Thanksgiving until after Christmas the onslaught of advertising for gifts is almost overwhelming. Consider how much effort we put into buying gifts, decorating our homes, attending Christmas functions and compare that effort with how much we focus on preparing ourselves spiritually for the great joy of Christmas.

On this Second Sunday of Advent we always get introduced to John the Baptist, or rather, re-introduced. John was called by God to prepare the way for Jesus. So it is fitting that John should show us the way through his own proclamation which reminds us to spend some quiet time

reflecting on our own lives in this season of preparation. Are we bearing the good fruit? Are we continuing to work on our spiritual lives so that we are as spiritually healthy as we can be? Only you can answer these questions truthfully for yourself.

John proclamation contains two important messages for the people of Israel. These two messages are proclaimed for us too. The first message is about repentance. Repentance is a confusing concept for many Christians today. For some the word repentance dredges up feelings of guilt and unworthiness, and may even stir up deep fears of the day of judgment. We might ask is repentance just saying sorry or does it require more of us? Is it just a matter of vowing to be a better person?

What John reminds us of, and what the season of Advent is for, is that repentance is not primarily about us and what we have done, but rather about God's desire to realign us to accord with Christ's life. So repentance is not so much about our feelings of guilt over something we might have done as about God's power to transform us into Christ's image.

Generally, we can come to repentance in two ways – willingly or unwillingly. Willingly means that we are conscious of the need to repent and purposely include acts of prayer and spiritual practices to help us open up to the power of God's transforming love. Some of us might though come to repentance unwillingly. For instance you might find yourself in a spiritual crisis, at a crossroad in your life, where things might be spinning out of control or you might just have experienced a separation from a loved one. In our despair we might reach rock bottom. If we can manage to still pray or even just be silent and still before God, we will find God there in the darkness with us. In that moment of vulnerability you will find repentance as God works in your heart.

The second message that John preaches to those in the desert is baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The whole act of the sacrament of baptism is transformational. Through the water of baptism we die to self, we die to our old self and become transformed through the Holy Spirit, to start on the way to a new life. John stood in the water of the river Jordan to symbolically wash clean those that would confess their sins. But the baptism in Christ he says, will be a baptism of far greater significance. It will be a baptism where God fully claims us for new life in Christ.

So both repentance and baptism are two powerful and transformative actions in our journey of faith. John is calling the people to come into a new relationship with Jesus Christ, who is to come after him, and who is more powerful than he. This new relationship means that it is Christ himself working to purify us rather than us working at self-purification. When we remember God's promises and actions in that long arc of salvation history we can have confidence and trust that Christ is indeed at work in us through the Holy Spirit.

When we stand in our own metaphorical desert feeling isolated and spiritually bereft we can draw comfort from the fact that God has been working to prepare the world for us and our

salvation from long ago. God uses quiet times like this season of Advent to speak with us. If we can open our hearts and be receptive to the spirit of God we can with time find our way out of the valley and onto the straight path back to the loving embrace of our God. This encounter with God and the journey back requires us only to be humble and prayerful.

Our role as Christ's witnesses in this world is to practice repentance for ourselves, and then with that experience, prepare the way for others so that they too can be redeemed to live a Christ-centered life. We work away in community to bridge the valleys and smooth the rough surfaces, make the roads a little straighter and the hills a little less steep. We encourage those who feel the spirit at work in them but who may be fearful of crossing the threshold into a life centered on Jesus.

So the season of Advent, like Lent, is given to us as a time for reflection. It is a season where we examine ourselves, our values, our relationships and our priorities. As we prepare our homes with festive decorations and gifts we also must prepare ourselves spiritually. If we prepare well we will experience a deeper sense of joy and hope, and come to understand that new life should indeed flow out of Christmas, like the life of the savior Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus has come and will come again as promised.

I now want to leave you with a reading of the same gospel passage from Matthew but from a different translation, one that might resonate with you. *The Message* is a contemporary rendering of the bible and its words and phrases around familiar biblical stories might come across as unfamiliar but hopefully they will help to illuminate scripture in a new way by awakening in us new curiosity.

Amen