

Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2023

Homecoming is the central theme of the Scripture readings for this Second Sunday of Advent. In fact all the three readings focus on the absolute necessity of our getting ready for Christ's "Homecoming" into our hearts and lives by true repentance, reparation, prayer and the renewal of our lives.

They also remind us that the past coming of Jesus, some 2000 years ago, the present daily coming of Jesus into our lives through the Eucharistic celebration, through the Scriptures and through the praying community, and his future coming (the Second Coming) are actually the fulfillment of God's saving plan for us all, from all eternity.

The first reading, taken from the prophet Isaiah, tells us about the Babylonian exiles coming home to their native country, Judah, and their holy city, Jerusalem. Isaiah assures his people that the Lord will lead them in a grand procession to their homeland and take care of them as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

The Psalmist in the Responsorial Psalm (Ps 85) describes how shalom or perfect peace is coming home with the Lord's coming.

In the second reading, Apostle Peter in his second letter invites us to get ready to go home to Heaven with our Lord Jesus at his Second Coming. Peter tells those who doubt the Second Coming of Jesus that God's way of counting time is different from ours and that God has His own reasons for delaying the Second Coming of Christ.

The Gospel too tells us through John the Baptist how we should prepare to receive Jesus our Savior's "coming home" into our lives during this Advent season by repentance and the renewal of our life.

There probably were several reasons why people went out into the desert to see John the Baptist. Some people were probably just curious, and wanted to see what all the fuss was about. (If this was happening today, these people would probably all be taking selfies with him!)

Some probably went out there because others they knew were making the trek, and they just wanted to go along with the group. Some (such as religious authorities)

probably wanted to make sure John wasn't doing anything blasphemous or contrary to Jewish law. And of course, I'm sure at one point or another the Roman authorities took a trip out there to ensure that he wasn't preaching a revolutionary message.

But there was another group. The group that wanted and needed more. These were people who went out to the desert to make things right with their God. These were people who knew their faults, their weaknesses, their sins. These were people who knew that they were anything but perfect, anything but whole. And most importantly, these were people who were wise enough to know that they couldn't "fix" those things on their own. They knew that they needed someone "mightier" than they were.

Was John that person?

John's message was not an easy one. It was quite challenging. It was firm. It was blunt. And yet people were able to hear the "authority" in his voice, hear the "truth" in his message. And so they came to him hoping that he could do something for them, help them change in some way, help them restore their friendship with their

God who had delivered them as a people time and time again.

And what was his message? What was he saying? Well, it was two-fold. First and foremost he preached a message of repentance. Now, it's important not to think of "repentance" in its most minimal sense. It doesn't just mean, "I feel bad," or even, "I'm sorry". True repentance involves both being sorry for what we have done, for the bad choices we have made, AND having a sincere desire and willingness to re-orient our lives, to make amends, to start heading in a new direction and down a new path.

And secondly, he made absolutely clear to his "followers" that he was NOT the one they had been waiting for. He was not the one who could ultimately "make things right" between them and their God. He was not the answer to whatever spiritual problems or difficulties they were having. No - he said in the strongest language possible,

"One mightier than I is coming after me.

I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals."

Do you ever really wonder why we spend weeks (or in some cases, months) getting ready to celebrate Christmas? Do we just like the idea of celebrating Jesus' birthday (as we would with anyone else)? Do we just look forward to getting together with family and friends for meals and gift-giving and parties? Do we just like to hear the Christmas songs on the radio and see the decorations lining up on our streets and shopping centers? Do we just think the Nativity is a nice story, the shepherds and the manger and the star and the angels?

Or is it more? And if so, what?

I will be the first to admit that I love all those things too. I like all the "extras" that go along with the Christmas season. I like seeing Santa at every mall welcoming children and asking them what they want for Christmas. I like Christmas cookies, and yes, even fruitcake though my health doesn't support them. And it's hard not to get caught-up in all of that. I get it. And yet there is a part of me who doesn't want my "enjoyment" of Christmas to be for all those other reasons. Rather, I want to be like those who went out in the desert to be changed, to be made whole, to be comforted and challenged and inspired to be better people, better versions of themselves.

And that's what Advent is about. That's why we set these four weeks aside year after year, not simply so that we can repeat the same things over and over again. No, Advent exists as an opportunity for you and me to get ready, to "prepare the way of the Lord". In other words, God is trying to get to us, God is trying to break into our lives and hearts, and it's up to us to make sure he can do precisely that.

But selfishness gets in the way. Egos get in the way. Bitterness gets in the way. A lack of compassion or mercy or generosity or kindness gets in the way. And yes, sin gets in the way too.

My dear friends in Christ, we get ready to celebrate God coming into our world and into our hearts because we NEED him in our world and in our hearts. We're not getting ready to celebrate God just "popping-in" for a visit. Visiting us when we least expect him. We're preparing ourselves for our loving God, someone mightier than we are, coming to us once again, not for a day, but to stay and dwell within us forever.

John understood that. May he help us understand it too.

