

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT (B)

Mark 1:1-8
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Immediately after Thanksgiving, it seems that most folks are simply anticipating the celebration of Christmas. We see Santa in the mall. The media are filled with holiday music and advertisements. Ornaments and decorations are unpacked. And I suspect that **very few** — if any at all — of those ornaments are of John the Baptist. Of Jesus and the angels — yes, of Santa and his reindeer there are plenty. But nary a trace of John the Baptist. This week and next in Advent, our Gospel focuses on John, but it is our tendency to just gloss over him.

John's message was quite simple and straightforward. He called on people to **prepare the way** of the Lord. He called on them to **repent**. But for so many people today, when they hear that word "**repent**," they think it sounds rather old-fashioned and out-dated, and really has nothing to do with us modern, sophisticated, and well-educated people. For the most part, people today are tempted to simply tune out John the Baptist.

It's rather like the way people tend to tune out the emergency instructions that flight attendants go over as an airplane is about ready to

take off. In my experience, while flight attendants give all kinds of important information about oxygen masks and emergency exits, most people are usually looking out the window, reading a magazine or maybe even falling asleep. People will be doing just about everything **except** listening to what the flight attendant has to say. Now maybe some are such frequent flyers that they have the instructions all memorized. But some apparently think: *“Oh, what they’re saying, that doesn’t apply to me, or it doesn’t really matter.”*

But the problem is, that if there should happen to be an emergency, then there isn’t time to go back and to have the flight attendant repeat what he or she has already said. ***It will be too late.*** What you need to do is ***pay attention*** right from the start.

And that is what we need to do with John the Baptist, because his words are directed to ***us*** — you and me. We need to pay attention to them ***now***. When John tells us to repent, ***we need to listen***. Because as St. Mark tells the story, John’s message is the ***beginning*** of the good news of Jesus Christ himself.

But again, a lot of people aren’t interested in listening to someone like John the Baptist. They ask, *“What gives him the right to tell me that I should change the way I live? After all, isn’t that a **personal** matter, what I*

do with **my** life?” But from John’s point of view, the answer to that question is “**No.**” We are not supposed to just do what **we want** with our lives. We are called to do what **God wants**.

Some time ago, I read an interesting article by Alan Jacobs, entitled “*The God of the Bestseller List.*” Jacobs’ contention in the article is that for the past few decades, there have been a number of very misguided books on spirituality, on the bestseller lists. He quotes from a number of those books in which the main message seems to be:

*Listen to your **feelings**.*
*Listen to your **highest thoughts**.*
*Listen to your **experience**.*
There is no such thing as right or wrong,
good or bad, better or worse.
*There is only what **serves you**,*
*and what does **not [serve you]**.*

So, if your feelings and experiences are at odds with the teaching of the Bible and the Church, then the Bible and Church must be wrong. The self is paramount. And whatever serves the self, is more important than anything else.

Jacobs summarizes his critique of these books and the spirituality they peddle with these words:

*What all these books most fundamentally reject is the notion that our wills [our feelings, our desires,] may be **twisted or bent**.*
The God of these authors never for a moment questions

or allows us to question the **validity** of our desires:
 He merely offers superior means for **realizing** those desires.

Jacobs' critique of these books, serves also as a critique of generic American religion and spirituality as a whole.

I'm reminded of the situation several years ago, when the famous actor and director, Woody Allen, was asked in an interview to explain why he had a sexual affair with his wife's adopted daughter. And this was Woody Allen's only response, he said: "*The heart wants what it wants.*" "*The heart wants what it wants.*" Of course the implication is, if I want it, I do it. **It's right for me.** I can't be held accountable to some standard — I can't be held accountable to anything or anyone, outside myself.

The heart wants what it wants.

The problem is, we are sinners. And sin has infected our hearts. We are people who get caved in on ourselves. And so we want a God who **neither instructs us, nor disciplines us.** Our sinful natural desire is for a God who offers **neither warning nor chastisement**, but who simply smiles wryly at our peccadilloes and affirms all our wants and passions, whatever they may be.

But brothers and sisters, that is not the God who sent, and who **will send again** Jesus. And that is not the God who sent John the Baptist to "*prepare the way*" for Jesus. The God who sends both Jesus and John the

Baptist, loves you enough to speak the truth about your condition.

In his “*Yale Lectures on Preaching*,” Henry Ward Beecher taught about this connection between God’s love for us and his sometimes stern words to us. He wrote:

*Do you not suppose that love has anger?
There is no such anger as that which a mother’s love furnishes.
Do you suppose that when she sees...the child
in whom her hope is bound up...
The child that is more to her than her own life,
doing a detestable meanness,
that she is not angry and indignant,
and that the child does not feel the [pain] of physical advice?
Do you not suppose that the child knows what anger is?
I tell you there is no such indignation possible as the
indignation that means **rescue, help, hope, and betterment.**
You might as well say that a summer shower has no thunder
as to say that love has no anger.
It is full of it...*

FATS, vol. III, p. 16

Sometimes a word of judgement, even a harsh word of judgement is just what we need. It doesn’t work to pretend our sins aren’t real, or that we shouldn’t be confronted by them. The only solution to sin is to **confess it**, and to **repent**. To seek yet again to follow **not our own wills**, not our own desires, but rather the will and the desire of God.

And the wonderful paradox of it all, is that repentance itself is the beginning of **hope**. For the moment our hearts heed the Baptist’s call and honestly recognize our failures and sins, that’s when our hearts begin to **desire renewal and change**. That’s when our hearts are softened and

able to be reformed by our Lord. That's when our hearts begin to experience true joy in the coming of the Messiah.

St. Mark tells us that the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, ***begins with John the Baptist*** and his call to repent. We would prefer to just jump right to the sentimental scene of the new-born baby in the manger. But God won't have it.

The Lord is at work to remake you and me, to recreate us and finally to recreate his whole creation. That's not going to happen by just affirming the status quo. It's not going to happen by telling you you're alright, and nothing needs to change.

And so, there is no way to approach Jesus — no way to approach the Messiah, ***except through John the Baptist***. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Our Lord, as we prepare for Christ's coming at the close of the age, as we prepare to meet Christ daily in the eyes of those in need, and as we prepare to meet our Lord in the Eucharist, may we do it always with a humble and contrite heart. May we prepare for the coming of Christ, with a heart rejoicing — open and desirous of turning to follow ***not what we want, but what God wants***.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.