

## **PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD; MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT**

Second Sunday of Advent

December 8, 2024

Hear again the words of the Gospel: “[John the Baptist] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

As we enter this Advent season of preparation for the Lord’s coming, we go about this vital work through repentance. Jesus said it this way: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” But what does it mean to repent?

Most churches would affirm that repentance includes turning away from sin. If you grew up in the church, how did that faith community teach you to turn from sin? But what does that look like? In the church my father attended as a boy, one of the ways they learned to avoid sin was through adherence to this simple philosophy; “done smoke, don’t drink, don’t chew; don’t go with girls that do!” Now, obviously their philosophy surrounding repentance meant much more than that. However, they did establish a strict set of expected behaviors that they believed would guard against sin and enable them to live a sanctified holy life. This list of behaviors included certain things to avoid: don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t go to movies, don’t play cards or dice, don’t play pool, don’t go to dances. For that denomination, and for many others at the time, this is what it looked like to live a sanctified life, to live a holy life, to be prepared for the Lord’s coming.

In my former denomination two of the requirements for membership was that you avoided all alcoholic beverages and smoking.

For many centuries the Christian church has identified seven deadly sins that were meant to be avoided: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, and Pride. Some churches identified a list of what they called venial or mortal sins that were to be avoided in order to prepare the way for the Lord's coming.

God has called us as followers of Jesus Christ to, individually and corporately, prepare the way for the Lord. But how do we do that? Well, as Jesus said, through repentance. But what is repentance, and how do we go about repenting? The universal Christian church down through the centuries has erred, I believe, in at least two ways; first, in the way they have understood, and managed sin, and second, in how they have understood the meaning of this word repentance.

Let me address the issue of sin and its management first. The leadership in many Christian churches down through the centuries, knowing the scriptures and the theological and philosophical heresies and errors seen in society, and the evil that lurked in the shadows, waiting to entrap and lead their vulnerable believers, the flock astray, have set firm boundaries, fences around the "sheep" to keep the "wolves" at bay. This is where the church came up with don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew, avoid lust and greed and sloth and mortal and venial sins. But how well has this form of sin management worked for the church? Not very well at all, as attested by the number of perpetrators AND victims found within various Christian denominations, and even in high levels of leadership.

Why has this system not worked very well? Well, there are many answers to that multifaceted problem. But one significant issue I want to address this morning has to do with the church's focus on external behaviors as a way to control our internal drives and passions.

Here's an example of what I mean. In preparing for this sermon, I did a web search for the seven deadly sins. The first site I found listed the seven sins, described them, and then gave what they called a "cure" for each one. Here are some examples: "Lust. Lust is a strong passion or longing, especially for sexual desires... Chastity or self-control cures lust by controlling passion. Gluttony, gluttony is an excessive and ongoing eating of food or drink... Temperance cures gluttony by implanting the desire to be healthy. The list went on and on. The cure for greed is charity. The cure for sloth is diligence. The cure for wrath is patience. The cure for envy is kindness. The cure for pride is humility. Now, all these "cures" do give us some good advice. But there is something significant missing in their suggested "cures".

In an attempt to encourage holiness and a love for God and a love for others, the church has ended up squelching and suppressing the very driving force, that is given to us by God as a gift to develop within us holiness and a love for God and a love for others. What is that gift that the church has squelched? It is the gift of our desires and passions.

The church, in seeing desire and passion as dangerous, and as the very thing that is used by the devil to tantalize and stir up our emotions, decided to suppress that desire in order to avoid opening the door to lust and greed and wrath, and all manner of sins. Now, I recognize that desire and passion should be handled carefully. But we don't want to throw out the baby with

the bathwater. And that “baby,” our desires and passions, are crucial for our spiritual development.

Jesuit priest Philip Sheldrake wrote a book in 1994 called “Befriending our Desires.” In it he wrote: “I, and many other Christians I have met over the years, have found it hard to think of desire as a key to the spiritual journey. On the contrary, desire is experienced as a problem or at least as something difficult to integrate with our understanding and practice of faith...Desire...is too often viewed with suspicion as something disturbing or misleading, even if pleasurable, rather than something to be embraced as a positive and dynamic force...I want to suggest that spirituality is in fact intimately associated with desire – our own and God’s.” So, as the church has historically suppressed desire in order to avoid sin, it has inadvertently suppressed the very gift that is meant to be used for deepening our passion and desire for God. If we can make a shift to see desire as something potentially healthy and good, then we can open our mind and heart to a deeper and fuller desire and passion for God. And as that passion for God increases, it will naturally decrease our desire for lesser things, for things that can be more destructive to our lives and our relationships.

Now let me turn to this word repentance in our Bible. This word comes from the Greek word metanoia. And metanoia means to change direction. It means to change your mind. Fr. Richard Rohr wrote this: “I’d like to emphasize change, because that’s *not* something we humans as a species are attracted to...We like things the way we like things. And yet the first words out of Jesus’ mouth tell us that he’s come to give us a philosophy of change: ‘Repent,’—*change your mind*—‘for the kingdom of heaven has come near’...John Henry Newman said, ‘Here below to live is to change, and

to be perfect is to have changed often.” That’s a great statement! Let me say it again: “Here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” Fr. Richard continues: “[Changing often is] a very different philosophy than most of us have. Our natural approach is to keep in cruise control. The way we do it is the way we do it, and any change is considered dangerous, heretical, and new...[However] the great [religious] traditions [have]always called people on a journey of faith to keep changing...There’s no way we can open up to all we have to learn, all we have to experience, unless we’re willing to let go of the idols of yesterday and the idols of today. The best protection from [following] the next word of God is the last word of God. We take what we heard from God last year and we build a whole system around it, and then we sit there for the rest of our lives.” Fr. Richard informs us that continual change is crucial to our ongoing transformation into the image of Jesus the Christ; to our ongoing spiritual formation.

Let me summarize. First, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah: “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” Know this, our passionate God longs for you; yearns for you; desires you. Be open to God’s desire. Respond to God with your own desire.

Second, Be open to change. Continue to change your mind and be willing to see things differently. To see differently how you understand God, understand yourself, understand the church, understand various doctrines, understand reality. Change your mind.