

The Second Sunday in Advent
St. Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The typical Gospel lesson fare for the season of Advent concerns the coming of the Christ. You heard this past Wednesday Gabriel announcing to the virgin Mary that she will conceive the Son of God and bear the Savior of the world. Sometimes the lesson is Palm Sunday, as you heard last week, which features Jesus coming into Jerusalem to bear the sin of the world on the cross. Sometimes you hear Jesus Himself speaking of His coming again in glory to judge the quick and the dead. And then there's this Sunday, where the central figure is a odd-looking man in dirty clothes telling people to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

And what a man he was! This man, John, lived in the wilderness, wore camel hair for clothes with some sort of leather strap for a belt, and he never enjoyed any of the finer amenities of life. In fact, his diet was a simple one. He enjoyed the sweetness of honey, likely raw with bits of hive and other things still in it. He might have had whatever nuts or berries he might have found while foraging. However, his source of protein was locusts...LOCUSTS!

It's no accident that he was like this. His lifestyle and appearance resembled that of an old prophet from years before: Elijah. In fact, the two men sounded very much alike, as well. Elijah once told Ahaziah to repent, to which the king responded by sending soldiers, twice, to apprehend the prophet; both times, Elijah called down fire from heaven to consume the soldiers. (2 Kings 1) His message to repent was a serious one.

John had taken up the mantle of Elijah as the predicted Elijah to come in preparation for the Messiah. How did John prepare the way for the Messiah? By preaching the same message as Elijah: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Some people took him seriously, for they journeyed to meet him and were baptized by him; his word was getting out.

Part of the reason for Advent is preparing to celebrate Christmas. The theme, liturgically, is preparation for the coming of the King, and in this day and age, that coming is only the coming in glory and judgment on the Last Day. However, the season bears that second purpose: preparing for Christmas.

This kind of preparation takes on two forms. One form of preparation is a happy kind, like a buildup to a celebration or party. Getting the decorations up. Getting the gifts and wrapping them. Getting all the food for the big day's feast. The other form, while I wouldn't call unhappy, does tend to be a bit more somber. It's the preparation of the heart to celebrate the first coming of the Savior of the world. It involves hearing about the coming of the Christ, those predictions mentioned earlier. It also involves some introspection: "How do I, by my life, seek to prevent the coming of the King of kings or otherwise tell Him that He's not welcome here?" It always involves the message of Elijah and John the Baptist: repent!

As the Baptist proclaimed: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." Nothing should crowd the path of the king. Nothing should be an obstacle for the king. He should be able to walk the path without looking at it; holding his head high as nobility, guided by his pages and attendants, or carried in his sedan. Modern visiting dignitaries get pretty much the same treatment: roads are repaired, cleaned, and blocked off for a time so that they (and their entourage) are the only ones who can travel on them, getting to where they need to be quickly and unencumbered by regular traffic, but still within sight of the (adoring) populace.

But John the Baptist was not calling for straight paths in the desert for any normal king. Christians, in preparing for Christmas, are not preparing for the birth of any ordinary child. Paths are

prepared for the King of kings and Lord of lords...God incarnate. How does one prepare for this? By making **straight** paths, of course.

Once again, John and Elijah were saying something similar. As Elijah called down fire to consume the soldiers, John is calling down the mountains to fill in the valleys. Just as you will sing in a bit: "Let the valleys rise to meet Him, and the hills bow down to greet Him."

But there's more—something different—to be said about the straight paths for the King of kings. Certainly, His paths should be straight, but your hearts and minds should also be on the straight and narrow paths. This is part of how Christian preparation for the coming of the King of kings looks. After all, if you are Christian, you love Christ, and if you love Christ, you keep His commandments—that's what He says in John 14:15! That means that the straight and narrow path is one of keeping God's commandments—a way of no sin.

Well, do you love the King? Do you love God and His Christ? I'm certain everyone here would all love to say that you do, but here is the Law's accusation: No one, not any single person here, keeps His commandments—all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (cf. Romans 3:23); The accusation is that while you may say that you love God, paying lip-service to the idea, as it were, and you may even put on a fine outward show, but by way of your actions and the true intent of your heart, you prove that you do not truly love God and His Christ. To put it another way: The good that you want to do you do not do, but the evil you do not want to do you keep on doing. (cf. Romans 7:19)

Your God has coming to you in flesh and blood like yours, and this God-man, Jesus Christ will return for you—He is holy and has salvation; He has come and is come and is now and here present and will come again! Therefore, repent, make a straight path for Him! That is to say, making straight paths is repentance! This is the message of John the Baptist—as it was of Elijah—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

The Baptist's message was truly serious. A holy God was coming, before whom anything unholy would be destroyed. Would it not be wise to repent? So, John issued the warning: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." There was no margin of error, there was no wiggle room: do what is right or be destroyed—either produce good fruit or be cut down and cast into the fire. There was no room for self-justification, no gray area. Either you were good and righteous or you weren't, and God was coming, bringing with Him His justice and wrathful fire. What was the unjust one to do? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!"

His message is truly serious for today, as well. The call to repentance is still issued. The axe is still at the ready, waiting to cut down that which does not produce good fruit. It is time to prepare for the coming of God, it is imminent. The axe may swing at any moment. Make your paths straight, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near!"

Dear Baptized into Christ, fear not, all hope is not lost! Yes, "the axe is already at the root," but there is another root. While the Law accuses you of not keeping God's commandments, it does not condemn you—it can no longer do so. Another prophet has proclaimed sweet, good news to counter this Law from God, but more than that, keep it perfectly in our place: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." Isaiah proclaimed that there is a stump, one stump—roots that will bear good fruit. From the stump of Jesse—from the line of David—will come the Holy One of Israel, who brings forth good fruit.

Today, I proclaim to you, dear Baptized, that this Branch has come, and has borne all good fruit. He has stood upon God's Law—perfectly, blameless, upright...holy! He took those good fruit to a tree, upon which He was nailed, from which He graciously gives those good fruit, and to which He has taken your unholiness, and destroyed it—the axe was swung and cut off this other tree in your place! Now,

therefore, the Law can no longer condemn you for its condemnation is complete in the crucifixion of the King of kings. No longer do you need to fear death—to fear being chopped down and thrown into the fire—for the tree upon which He gave His life has become for you *the* Tree of Life!

This Branch has grown into the True Vine. Through Baptism, you have been grafted to Him. And, grafted to Him, you are planted by streams of living water, so that through Him you can produce those good fruit—through Him and by Him you are able to bear fruit in keeping with repentance—to bear the good fruit of making straight paths. By Him and through Him, and **only** by and through Him, are you made holy.

And the gift He brings for those who bear the good fruit is forgiveness. His free gift to you who have been Baptized into Christ and grafted to the Vine is forgiveness of sins. He produces the good fruit of repentance in you and matches it with His most holy absolution.

So, instead of preparing yourselves for the coming of the King of kings, you are prepared. While you could never hope in of of yourself to prepare yourself—while you could never hope to bear good fruit of your own will—by God's gracious actions on and in you, you are prepared to meet and greet the coming again of the Savior. By His gracious action, you look forward to Christmas as a time to celebrate the birth of the Savior and a time to rejoice that Salvation has come down to earth. By His gracious action, you look forward to that unknown day, when the kingdom of God will once again descend on the earth and fulfill the prophecy spoken through John: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." You can look forward to that day, because, being Baptized into Christ and by His grace remaining faithful, you are His wheat!

To be prepared to celebrate Christ's birth is to be prepared for His second coming. During Advent, as you prepare to celebrate Christmas—the first coming to earth of Christ—you are being prepared for and eagerly expect the return of Christ—His second coming! Forgiven of all our sins, grafted to the vine, you look with anticipation to that day when you will be gathered in His barn, joining Him in His Heaven. Because, as Isaiah said, "In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious." So, with joy The Church prays, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

And until that time, you are kept and prepared, making straight paths for His coming, producing fruit in keeping with repentance by way of being grafted to The Vine, which is Christ, and receiving from Him the forgiveness of all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.