

## SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT [C]

Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6  
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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A while back, I read an article about the topography here in Kansas. As I remember it, a scientist at one of our state universities had so frequently heard the phrase that Kansas was “flatter than a pancake” that he decided to put it to the scientific test. And so he devised a method to compare, by scale, the topography of a typical pancake to that of the Kansas plain. Not surprisingly, his conclusion was that Kansas truly is, “flatter than a pancake.”

I couldn't help but think of that, and of the geography of the entire Midwest, upon reading this week's Gospel, with John the Baptist quoting the prophet Isaiah, “*Prepare the way of the Lord...Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low.*” One might be forgiven for thinking that here in Kansas, the preparations for the coming of the Lord, have already been accomplished!

John the Baptist is a prophet called to **get people ready** for the coming of the Messiah. And so John admonishes his hearers to “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*”

In the days of the Babylonian Empire, engineer soldiers known as “sappers” would precede the monarch as he traveled in his chariot to visit his dominions. These “sappers” would virtually construct the road upon which the king would travel. They leveled hillocks, built up ditches, and filled in holes, so that the royal chariot could make some kind of speed. That context then, can help us understand this command to **prepare the way of the Lord**. It means to get the obstacles out of the way. No detours are permitted; there is no time to waste. The coming of the King, calls for changes to be made.

Of course, John the Baptist is **not** talking about **literally** constructing a highway, or leveling mountains and filling in valleys. One might say John is speaking of constructing a **figurative** or **spiritual** highway in our hearts for the coming Messiah. John is calling for a leveling and smoothing of the mountains and valleys **in our lives**, which may oppose or stand in the way of the coming king.

In short, what John is talking about is **repentance**. “*Metanoia*” — the Greek word for repentance — literally means “turning around.” When we repent, we **turn around** and face the other way. We go in a **new direction**. Actions and thoughts that were part of our former stance are no longer acceptable. Repentance — turning around — implies a thorough change in attitude and action. Whereas in our former state we might have been inclined to live and act one way, as we repent, we resolve to **change** the way we live and act. Recognizing the obstacles in our path is a step toward repentance. **Removing them** is true repentance.

Today, there is considerable risk that in this time of “tolerance” and “cheap grace,” a part of the message of Advent, the message about repentance, will be missed or ignored. These days, it is so tempting to focus on hope in the abstract, or to simply rush Christmas and talk about glad tidings of great joy. The glad tidings of the coming Messiah are, however, in large part, the announcement of the *forgiveness of sins*. It is inescapable then, that the Church’s Advent preparation, must involve confession and repentance.

For in truth, learning that you are a sinner, is in fact part of the good news — it is part of the Gospel. Because it means knowing what the real problem is, knowing that there is a God whom you have offended, and to whom you can be reconciled. To name sin properly is already to name God, and to open up the possibility of forgiveness. John the Baptist proclaims this great truth, to prevent us from settling for the *counterfeit* and *false peace* of those who would avoid the concrete reality of our brokenness and our consequent need to be delivered from our sins.

Indeed, John the Baptist helps make it clear that it is the adult Jesus, *crucified and risen*, whom we celebrate at Christmas. We would never approach the manger at Bethlehem, if the child born there, were not also the *Paschal Lamb* and the *Good Shepherd*. Christmas is, as the Orthodox Church sometimes call it, “the winter Pascha” — the winter celebration of Christ’s death and resurrection. And St. John the Baptist helps us to remember that *all* of this season is finally about *repentance, forgiveness, and salvation*, which spring from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the verses just prior to our First Reading this morning, the prophet declares: “*Look toward the east, O Jerusalem and see the joy that is coming to you from God.*” And then in the fifth verse of our Reading, that call to look to the east is repeated: “*Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height and look toward the east.*”

That call to “look to the east” is repeated again and again in, and is the inspiration for the Advent hymn “*People, Look East*” found our hymnal supplement, *With One Voice* (WOV #626).

*People, look east. The time is near. . .*

*People, look east, and sing today—*

*Love, the Guest, is on the way.*

*People, look east, and sing today—*

*Love, the Rose, is on the way.*

*People, look east, and sing today—*

*Love, the Star, is on the way.*

*People, look east, and sing today—*

*Love, the Lord, is on the way.*

What is the significance of all of this “*looking to the east?*” What does it mean?

Well, “looking to the east” is at heart, a way of speaking about *repentance*. For repentance again, means to *turn around*, and go in a new direction. It means to *change* your life, to *change* the way you’re living.

In the Church, east has always been considered the direction from which the Lord would return, in the same way that the sun daily returns in the eastern sky. West then — where the sun goes down — west has been considered the direction of darkness and evil, the direction of the devil. So, Christians who are called to a life of repentance — to a life of daily repenting — are called to continually turn symbolically, from the west to the east.

In fact, in the early Church, this repentance, this turning from sin and darkness, to Christ and the light, was ritually enacted in the Baptismal liturgy. Just before the confession of faith in the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the baptismal candidate would first renounce the devil, sin, and evil — just as we still do today. But centuries ago, the Church would have the baptismal candidates then spit three times facing west. And then they would quite *literally repent*. That is they would *physically turn themselves* and go in a new direction. They would turn from the west to the east, and then facing east, they would confess their faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, as those who have been baptized, as those chosen by God and marked as his children — John the Baptist’s cry is a reminder to you, that you are to remember your baptism *every day*.

Every day you must remember *who* your God is. Every day you must remember *who* has claimed you. Every day you must remember *to whom* you belong. Every day you must remember that in your Baptism you have been joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And so *every day you must repent*. Every day you must turn again — turn from Satan to Christ. Turn from west to east. Turn from darkness to light. Turn from sin to righteousness. Turn from being *self*-centered to being *God*-centered. Turn from following *your own* way to following the way of the Lord.

Now to be sure, that daily turning, that daily repentance is *work*. Sometimes, it is truly *hard work*. But brothers, and sisters, you *can* do it. Because you already belong to Christ.

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