

2nd Sunday Advent Year “C”

December 9, 2012

The Rough Ways Made Smooth

Readings: Baruch 5:1-9; 1 Philippians 1:4-6,8-11; Luke 3:1-6

Perhaps when you were growing up you had a favorite toy, hobby or craft. Not being at all artistic, my interests often turned to the scientific. One gift from Christmas in particular caught my fancy—it was a rock tumbler. This was a fascinating machine that when used properly over a period of time, transformed rough rocks into smooth and shiny stones.

Theoretically, you could make jewelry after the stones were polished, though this did not interest me in the least. I just enjoyed looking at the stones, and feeling how clean and smooth they felt in my hands. I could not believe the transformation. It actually changed rough stones into beautiful, high luster, semiprecious gemstones, such as amethyst, jasper, and agate. It worked by means of perhaps up to five different grits and polishes that slowly broke down the rough rocks. I can still remember the sound of it turning over endlessly for hours; it fascinated me. I brought it to Show and Tell.

You would not recognize the rough, dirty grey stones a few days later. This is because 30% of the rock or more was ground away with each rough grind. But you had to be patient and wait. In this day of Video games and electronics, I suspect that this craft is not on most Christmas lists today! But they still make them. I suggest the Thumler AR-1 Beginner’s Kit, complete with all the grit and even the rocks!

The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. I believe that my rock-polishing hobby actually taught me a tremendous amount about just what transformation really entails. What was ugly and dirty at first glance was able to be changed into something beautiful.

But how many of us are willing to take the time? For the Christian willing to be transformed, the Lord will apply a process to us that is not dissimilar. We will go through painstaking trials, with multiple layers peeled back, each revealing something more about ourselves. But this is precisely where most stop the process. Not wanting to see what is revealed beneath the surface, they fail to persevere. We are very good at putting on the appearance of having it all together, but we lose out because of our stubbornness and fear.

For example, we put on our best Sunday clothes for Mass. This is appropriate and necessary to show the Lord that what we are about here is not ordinary. So we wear clothing that is more formal to reflect what we are about worshipping our Lord. This is not phony; rather it speaks volumes about how we see the Mass.

The transformation may happen right here in this Church, as we pray, reflect, gaze towards the heavens. But more likely, the real work of transformation takes place outside of Church. This happens when we are brought low on account of our failings, when we become all too aware of our shortcomings. If, using our free will, we first acknowledge and then attack vice, weakness and character flaws, we then become freed. When we stop making excuses, “Well this is just the way I am,” and begin to see possibilities beyond it, we have opened ourselves to the transforming power of God’s love.

Saint Luke felt that it was important enough to have included all the historical details surrounding when the voice came to John in the desert. Why? Those names mean little to us...fifteenth year of Tiberius, and what on earth is a tetrarch after all? But they pinpointed the decisive moment when the Word of God so transformed John that he went through the whole region of the Jordan preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

He heard a Word that he could neither deny nor from which he could run. It grabbed hold of him and absolutely transformed him.

Why are we afraid to allow this to happen to us? I for one do not exactly feel attracted to his severe life in the desert. I am much too comfortable right here. Our transformation will need to progress slowly but surely, with plenty of grit and polish. My Rock Tumbler ran 24/7. It never slept; it never stopped working. I could feel its heat just by touching the machine. While we cannot stay awake all night, our longing for the Lord can. In one of his more famous sermons, Saint Augustine noted:

“Longing is always a prayer, even though the tongue is silent. If you are longing without interruption, then you are always praying. When does our prayer sleep? Only when our desire cools.” (Sermon 80, 7).

So the key is to keep the flame of desire for God strong in our hearts. Do not let it cool. We must first rest in the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally, just as we are, rough and raw at times, but also with the potential through grace to shine brilliantly before the Father.

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to St. John the Baptist, whom while hardly polished in appearance or speech, radically allowed himself to be transformed by love, breathing the fire of the Holy Spirit, sharing its power with whomever would listen.

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