

2nd Sunday Advent Year "B"

December 5-6, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

How I managed to talk two other priests into joining me on a 457-mile journey on a gravel road may well go down as one of my best sales pitches ever. The trip included two ferry rides across rivers, one smoke-filled motel—the sole stop along the way— and swarms of mosquitos and black flies. We drove from Dawson City Yukon Territory to Inuvik in the Northwest Territories. This was no ordinary road—the Dempster Highway sits atop a gravel berm to insulate the permafrost in the soil underneath.

They even provide a lecture about the lack of services. If your car breaks down or have a flat tire, you are on your own. What had I gotten us into? By the grace of God, our rental car was reliable, and we were treated to the most amazing vistas imaginable: vast plains, arctic tundra, impressive ice-cored hills called pingos, and driving hours without seeing another vehicle. Only when pulling over for a photo op at the Arctic Circle during a mosquito swarm, did the full impact of our choice became clear.

Clearly, the road less travelled. “A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!” How is it that we make straight a highway for our God? How are we to prepare the path, so that the Lord may enter? Today’s second reading may provide an indirect answer— we are to conduct ourselves in holiness and devotion, all while we await new heavens and a new earth.

“Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; the rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley.” That’s quite the vision! So, how do we realize such a vision? It begins with a full and intentional process of interior conversion. Obviously, to make straight the path implies that it is currently crooked. Thus, unless we admit a need to make adjustments, we’ll stay stagnant, perhaps even more or less content. But we will never realize our fullest potential— and what a shame that would be.

John the Baptist knew well the potential in the people of God, people who were willing to acknowledge their own sin and weakness. Those who were receptive to the truth, he baptized— people in the Judean countryside as well as the inhabitants of Jerusalem. What did they see in John? They saw passion, they saw austerity, and to be blunt, even a little quirkiness.

But it was an authentic quirkiness, so they could look beyond the camel's hair clothing and the diet of locusts and wild honey. But one thing was certain— John was on fire for the Lord. You can neither fake that, nor hide it. It stood out, loud and clear.

And yet in all this, John pointed beyond himself. He was the complete antithesis of a preacher in love with his own reputation. We priests ought not to draw attention to ourselves; rather, we point to another. If— and this is a big IF— if we model our lives on Jesus, we can be an effective sign of the Kingdom and a powerful witness to God's goodness and truth.

When John proclaimed his unworthiness, it was not false humility; it was his absolute conviction. When we see our own unworthiness, not in the sense of self-loathing— but in all humility— then we can be lifted up, strengthened and made whole by the power of God's grace. Then we will be at peace, found without spot or blemish before Him.

The Second Sunday of Advent beckons us to find God's power, precisely by acknowledging our own lack of power within us. In our weakness, we are made stronger, our loving and ever-patient God brings about a change, a movement towards wholeness.

Let us do our part to prepare this Advent by clearing away the brush, the brambles and weeds of our bad habits, our worst inclinations and entrust those parts of our lives to God's healing touch. In the meantime, our job is to get out of the way, clearing the path, so that by means of his transformative love, the Lord may enter more deeply into our lives.