



2nd Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021

Have you noticed that people started decorating early for Christmas this year? Seems like we have all been longing for a reason to celebrate. So why not get an early start, especially after the frightening reality we have all lived these 22 months since COVID took hold.

What has also arrived early, at least in my thinking, is the Sunday of Joy, Gaudete Sunday, normally celebrated the third Sunday of Advent. Well, just like the Christmas lights, the Sunday of Joy has come one week early, today, on this second Sunday of Advent.

And, oh, how the readings perfectly capture the narrative that we need to embrace and believe in today - a “rounding the corner” narrative, a sense that the tide is finally turning in our favour, that the passage we have been living is moving towards a happy and joy-filled conclusion!

We certainly hope for this to be true, as did our ancestors in their age, wrestling with pandemics of their own.

God’s word today tells us that not only can we hope and believe that we are turning a corner, we can have faith and know this to be true. We have every reason to celebrate in this joyful season of Advent!

Listen to the prophet, Baruch, speaking to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to us today “ Arise, stand upon the heights... Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction!” Know that we now walk in God’s hands - the valleys will rise to meet us, the mountains will lower themselves - so that we can safely pass!

The psalmist, too, seems to be speaking directly to us today, coaxing us to believe that we have truly emerged from the shadows, “may those of us who have sown in tears, now reap with shouts of joy!”

And then we come to the gospel, and are introduced once again to the dour and sombre figure of John the Baptist, “crying out in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. And here, if you’re like me, you are stopped-short, the hope-filled recovery narrative threatens to give way in our minds to that familiar negativity, the Advent spirit starts to waver, the treasured Christmas ornament looks set to fall from the tree!

Richard Rohr speaks of John the Baptist as a prophet, who got a lot right, but a lot wrong too. John was certainly a humble man, whose genius, according to Rohr, lay in the fact that he knew

there was someone greater than he, and that his sole role was to point people in His direction. But the, (frankly) angry, moralistic and ascetical religion of John the Baptist was very different than the religion of Jesus, who was to come - the joy-filled Jesus, who would invite all to the feast, who would exclude no one, and who would be so excited to welcome the repentant home that he would literally leap with joy!

Unfortunately in our tradition, the word repentance has been associated exclusively with sin, and sin has become equated with shame, and shame has emphasized punishment, and we have inherited and internalized this sense of sin, of shame and self-punishment.

The true meaning of repentance, according to Biblical scholars, is much broader and more positive than this. To repent means to turn around, to change one's mind, to embrace a new direction and a new narrative - to be put right with oneself and with one another.

And that is what the readings are calling us to do today - to change our minds and open our hearts and know that we are safe in the arms of a loving God.

All this week in preparation for this reflection I have taped a small sticky note to my laptop on which I wrote "repent = turn around". It helped guide my thoughts. More importantly it reminded me to turn round my thought patterns. More than I regularly care to admit, I am stuck in what I call puny narratives. My puny narratives consist of this - habitual worry, vague fears, a sense that a misstep or misfortune is right round the corner. I know this narrative is self-defeating and is not from God; that's why, even though it looms large, I call it puny. The readings today remind me that I need to turn away from my puny narratives and joyfully find and embrace my larger calling from God. That's what repentance is for me today, to trust, in the apostle Paul's words, "that the One who began a good work in me will bring it to completion".

Paul is writing to his friends, the Phillipians from a prison cell. His literal bondage reminds us that we too can be in bondage in a variety of different ways and that it is in community and family that we can be released from bondage and receive repentance. A friend of mine, through no fault of his own, had burned every bridge with his family, given an acute mental health episode. As a result, he was isolated and alone as Christmas day dinner approached. With trepidation he called his sister, risking further rejection, asking if he could come. She hesitated somewhat but then replied simply with three words "prends ta place" Three words, "take your place" that signified so much - in her view it was not really her decision to accede to his request, it was an imperative, knowing that his place at the table could never be taken away. Her yes, was modelled on the yes, of Jesus in welcoming the prodigal, in searching for the lost sheep.

So today truly is a joyful second Sunday of Advent. May we seek and find repentance within ourselves, with one another and with our God. As we wait for the birth of the child in Bethlehem, dependent on us for tender care and love, may we extend this love and care to each of our own and to each of our neighbours.