

Second Sunday of Advent – December 6, 2015

An interesting start to today's gospel, no? Check out again the names of the rich and powerful, the movers and the shakers. There's Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanius, Annas and Caiaphas. The Word of God doesn't stop at any of their doorways. Instead, it searches out a priest's son who is also a prophet, and finds him alone in the desert. Who is this John the Baptist anyway? What can he have to say to us?

John the Baptist, borrowing from the language of Isaiah, sees himself as a construction worker. He wants to make straight the paths that should lead us to God. In fact, he wants us to be active participants in building a smoother highway that leads us home to God.

If the road is too winding, it will need to be straightened. If it is littered with potholes, it will need to be smoothed out. Is there a mountain in the way, flatten it out. Should a valley slow travel time to a crawl, let it be pushed up flatter. We have here a man on a mission; John the Baptist is determined to get us to Jesus, the merciful face of God.

If John the Baptist were to look us in the eye and ask a simple question, it might go something like this: what is it that keeps Jesus from getting to us? Can we name the potholes in our discipleship? The penetrating gaze of the Baptist bids us finally to let go of our sins, to turn around our less-than-holy desires, to repent. Construction work needs to be done so that Jesus can get to us with his good news.

So what needs to be done this Advent? Two key insights from our long Catholic tradition may help. First, we are not our sins. We must not identify with our sins. Our minds may tell us that that's just who we are. But deepest down, we are more. We need to go beyond the mind to let go of our sins. That's why we repent and seek mercy, so we can hear again who we really are: God's beloved.

Secondly, when we get to that spacious place, we become more convinced than ever that God is merciful, that God does not tire of forgiving us, that God no longer holds on to our sins. If God has let go of our sin, who is holding on?

The mercy and forgiveness of God is where the real action is. Jesus, the face and flesh of God's mercy, welcomes us and hands over his Spirit to us. Maybe a lot of construction work needs to happen to get us to this sacred place, but when we advance toward it, we shine. We shine.

This Advent, as we begin the Year of Mercy, we are bid to receive that mercy and share it in old and new ways. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.