

*“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,”* our text begins. That places this story between the years 26 and 29. Which is interesting because last Sunday’s Gospel reading was the beginning of Holy Week, some three or so years after this. Even more interesting is that the Gospel reading two weeks from now is some thirty years before this, when John the Baptist and Jesus are still within the wombs of their mothers.

Do you see what is happening? We are going backwards in time. Last Sunday John the Baptist was dead and buried. Today he is just beginning to cry out in the wilderness. Next Sunday he still cries, but from a prison cell. And two Sundays from now John is waiting to be born.

Every year the Church calendar moves us forward. We follow Jesus from His birth, to His sufferings, death, and resurrection. On the Sundays after Pentecost, we follow His public ministry always moving forward chronologically. Until Advent when we move backwards. And there has to be a reason for this. These texts are not simply picked at random. So why, then, are we every Advent in rewind mode?

Maybe it’s because our lives have been in fast-forward mode. Don’t we always complain that the days move too quickly from Thanksgiving to Christmas? There is not enough time to do everything that needs to be done. Yet when we complain in this manner, we are thinking of material, not spiritual things. What a shame if we do not finish our shopping, wrapping, and baking by Christmas. But what a tragedy if our hearts are not ready for the Lord Jesus to enter there.

The truth is that our lives are out of control. We need to pause, turn around, and back up. That is the actual meaning of the word to repent. To turn about and do a 180. And Advent helps us to do just that.

*“Prepare the way of the Lord!”* cries the Advent preacher, *“Make His paths straight.”* But who likes a straight path? If 94 out here was a straight highway, it would not have much appeal, and few would come out from the city to visit.

Some of us have lived here so long that we drive 94 like it was a straight highway. And may God have mercy on the one who slows us down. But a straight path it is not. It is curvy and hilly, as you know. Yet we don’t mind it as long as no one gets in our way.

Is this not an accurate picture of our hearts and lives? We are full of sin. But it’s our sin, and we’re used to it. It doesn’t bother us so much, just as the hills and curves out there don’t really bother us.

We have been in our sins too long. Do we even feel remorse anymore when we let an entire day go by without spending a few minutes in the Word of God? Or when we miss a Sunday in His house, and it was for some lousy reason? But we’ve become accustomed to our sins of spiritual neglect. Just as we have grown accustomed to a little lusty here and there, a little swearing, a little pride, a little greed, and a little, or maybe a lot, of disrespect toward those in authority over

us. The highway to our hearts may not be very straight. But we're used to it, and for the most part we're okay with it. Isn't that what matters?

Then why does the Advent preacher cry, "*Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low!*" Why does he cry with these words? Because if we are okay with our sin, then we are not repenting of it. And unrepentant sin is unforgiven sin.

We must repent. But there's a problem. Repentance is not something we can muster from within ourselves. Are you able to go out there and turn 94 into a straight and level highway? Even if you had road-building equipment, you would not be able to do it. And yet it would be far easier to do that than to straighten and level the path to your heart. We cannot do it, even if we wanted to.

And so, when the Advent preacher cries, "*Repent!*" it is the cry for God Himself to take action for us. He becomes that vehicle which gets in our way. He is the one, as you and I are speeding along over the hills and around the curves, who gets in our face and slows us down, so that He becomes the roadbuilder to our hearts, lowering every mountain and hill, filling every valley, and straightening every crooked curve.

We are out of control with our sinfulness. And in mercy, God is the one who halts our fast-forward mode, turns us around, and backs us up. How far back? He backs us all the way to our baptism into Christ Jesus.

John came "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" That is what your baptism is. And that is why God puts you into rewind mode to take you back to your baptism. For the forgiveness of your sins.

That's why Jesus came as a baby. To die on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. And that's why He comes to you now in your baptism, in His supper, in His absolution. He comes with forgiveness for you.

This is why Advent is so important. For the purpose of slowing us down, and turning us around, so we live better lives? Well, yes. We do want to live better lives. We do want to repent, to turn around. But Advent takes us backwards to when Jesus was born. Born on Christmas, yes. But even more, when He was born within you in your baptism. And that means everything.

"*All flesh,*" cries the prophet, "*shall see the salvation of God.*" Well, you saw His salvation on the day of your baptism. That day the angels rejoiced. That day was the salvation of God toward you. That day God forgave you all your sins.

And this is why He slows you down, and turns you around, and puts you in rewind back to your baptism. Because this is who you are every day. One who is forgiven. One to whom He has given salvation. One in whom He is at work, day and night, "*preparing the way of the Lord, making His paths straight.*" Amen.