

As we enter into this second week of Advent, this second week of joyful preparation, we hear this command from the prophet Baruch, "Take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever." Now, in the context of Advent this makes perfect sense. We are after all joyfully anticipating the birth of the Lord, and we are awaiting his second coming, where all will be brought into one in him. But, Baruch is saying this to the Israelites at one of the most desperate times in their history, perhaps even *the* most desperate time. He and Jeremiah were prophets during the Babylonian exile - when the Babylonians had ransacked Judea killing myriads of people, They besieged and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. They demolished the Jewish temple and enslaved the Jewish elite.

Now remember, the Jewish people are God's chosen people. Jerusalem was the capital established by David, and the temple located there was essential to the worship of the Jews. It was the place around which God was supposed to gather all the nations, and reunite the 12 tribes of Israel. This was not supposed to happen. Furthermore, the destruction of the temple was a serious problem for the Jewish people, as the Temple was essential to the practice of the Jewish faith. By analogy, for us Catholics it would be similar to the eradication of every priest and bishop, making it impossible for Catholics to celebrate the Eucharist.

So it's against this bleak background that we hear Baruch say, "Take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever." Well, what a curious thing to say. Why does he say this? He says this because God is about to act. "Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights; look to the east," the prophet says. The east is the direction of Babylon. So they are looking in the direction of their enslaved leaders. And he tells the people that God is going to bring back the people who were "Led away on foot by their enemies." In the midst of this darkness God is about to act. Baruch is telling the Jewish people that this is something we don't want to miss. This is one of those times when everyone should be standing in anticipation, because God is going to save his people.

Well, now we see the depth of the Church's wisdom in selecting this reading for the second Sunday of Advent. Because Advent, is in fact, the anticipation of our own salvation. It is a season where we prepare for the second coming of Christ, where we are reminded that we are constantly awaiting his second coming, even as we memorialize his birth at Christmas. And so like the Jewish people, we look east, constantly awaiting the coming of the one who will save us, who will gather all of God's children together.

But our anticipation, we learn is not to be a passive one. No, no. It requires work on our part. We are not passive recipients of our salvation. No, we actively participate in the salvation wrought for us by Jesus Christ.

"Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight his paths." John the Baptist tells us. In other words, there is work that needs to be done, and we need to get about doing that work.

So how do we prepare the way of the Lord? How do we make those crooked ways straight? How do we put into action "the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" that John was preaching?

Well, certainly this can be done through prayer and the sacraments. Many parishes, including our own, have reconciliation services during this season, so that

people can seek forgiveness and make every mountain and hill low and every winding road straight.

I urge you to take advantage of those. We as Catholics are blessed by the fact that we have a sacrament where we can be forgiven of our sins, and where we can amend our lives and make those crooked paths straight. Don't let such a valuable resource, such a valuable tool for salvation, go untapped.

Now, that being said, we cannot limit our preparation for the coming of the Lord to simply going to confession. No, as St. Paul tells us, we have to bring to completion the good work God has begun in us. So, how do we do that?

Well, let's take a look at that Gospel passage once again. We learn that John's proclamation is a fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

Biblical scholars tell us that this passage in today's Gospel and in Isaiah is ambiguous. When scripture was originally written, there was no punctuation used. So this passage could be read as John saying I am the voice of one crying in the desert "prepare the way of the Lord." Or it could be read as John saying, I am the voice of one crying, "In the desert, prepare the way of the Lord."

Fascinating, isn't it? If we take the latter interpretation, as I am apt to do, then we realize that this Advent time is also a time when we, too, should enter into the desert. When we should enter that place where we are removed from all the distractions around us. In the desert we are free to examine our own lives. It is a place where we can't hide behind false pretenses, where we are stripped of the worldly things we use to define ourselves. In other words, it is a place where we come to know ourselves as we truly are, and bring that true self before God.

So, how can we do this? Well, I once heard a teenager challenge his peers to go into the desert by spending 10 minutes a day in prayer for 21 days. He told his peers to turn off the TV, the computer, the cell phone, and to find a quiet space without any distractions. And then to spend a 10 minutes in that space, alone with God. Let me suggest that kid was right on target. By taking 10 minutes of our day, and using that time to remove ourselves from all the distractions of the world around us, we give God an opportunity to bring the good work he has begun in us to completion. And ultimately that is what we are trying to do as we joyfully await the coming of our savior. We are joyous because we know he is coming, and we are active, because we know that there is work to be done in preparation for his return.

So this advent season I encourage you to go into the desert, and look to the east anticipating the coming of the Word of God. Then, once you have heard that word of God, rejoice and take off your cloak of sadness and mourning. And as you are rejoicing, work! Make those windy roads straight. And by all means persevere. Continue to stay the course so that God may bring the good work he has begun in you to completion.