***Second Sunday of Advent***

\*\*\*Mike Wise was a sports columnist for the Washington Post. On a January night 9 years ago, he was jogging along the C&O Canal in downtown Washington with his dog, a golden Lab named Looly.

-The canal was frozen solid, and Looly decided to go exploring on the ice. It wasn’t as strong as she thought, and she fell through.

-Mike Wise panicked, and ran into the canal and onto the ice to rescue her. He grabbed a hold of his dog, but soon he was overcome by the freezing cold and the water. He began to cry for help. He could feel his body beginning to shut down and go into shock.

-A stranger passing by heard him, and ran to the water’s edge. He reached out a hand, and helped pull Mike and his dog to shore.

-Freezing and out of breath, Mike asked him his name. “Jason,” he said. “Jason Coates.” He told him he was a law student at George Washington University.

-And moments later, assured that Mike and the dog were okay, Jason went on his way.

-It was an encounter Mike Wise never forgot. He and Jason have stayed friends through the years and Mike even presided at Jason’s wedding.

-There, he retold the story of how they met, how Jason saved his life.

-And as he was gazing at the friends gathered, Mike caught sight of his own wife, who was expecting their second child, and his four- year-old son, Oliver.

-He realized that none of it would have happened — his marriage, his children, his life after the accident—if it weren’t for the unexpected hand that grabbed hold and pulled him to safety.

-It’s a story of remarkable heroism. A story of someone who went out on a limb to risk his own life to help another.

**-It is also a story, I think, of Advent**. Advent is like that. It is the hand pulling us out of the cold, rescuing us, so we can start again.

-It is a second chance.

I think we could say that John the Baptist is the Saint of Second Chances, the one calling us to get ourselves right with God and turn our lives in another direction.

-He’s a radical reminder that we can change. We can start anew. John’s hand reaches out to pull us ashore, to a place of security and safety.

-We need to ask ourselves: “Are we willing to grab hold?”

-Because to do that is to admit our weakness, our frailty, our helplessness and dependency—and it is an important way during Advent to make ourselves ready for Christ.

-It seems like it gets harder every year, doesn’t it? Advent is supposed to be a time of quiet expectation.

-Of course, everything in our culture fights that. We are being Perry Como-ed and Bing Crosby-ed and Mariah Carey-ed to death.

-There are lists to be made, meals to be organized, cards to be mailed, parties to attend, cookies to be consumed, candy to be inhaled, ugly sweaters to wear, diets to be neglected.

-Yet, none of that is really what this time of year, Advent, is truly about.

-Advent is something more than getting ready for Christmas.

**-It’s about getting ready for Christ.**

*-Prepare the way of the Lord!*

-Christ doesn’t care if the halls are decked or the stockings are hung. He’s not listening to hear what carols are playing on rotation in the mall.

-He wants nothing more than to dwell in our hearts.

-But we make the path to our hearts so confusing sometimes – with detours of self-delusion or pride or pettiness or sin.

-The scripture calls on us to make those paths straight. Smooth out the rough spots. Level the mountains, the obstacles.  Fill in the valleys that are empty, hollow, devoid of life.

-Look more deeply into what this season is about. It is about warmth in a time of cold, light in a period of darkness. It is about salvation that came to us as a child—and that will come again at the end of time as the king of glory. Advent calls on us to be ready for that.

It calls us to pray more intently. To hope more fervently. To love more generously.

**That is how we prepare the way of the Lord.** That is how we make it easier for him to enter our hearts. The Baptist’s cry this weekend is nothing less than a call to conversion.  He’s offering us a second chance.

Who among us wouldn’t take that?

At a moment when he needed it, Mike Wise got a second chance.

Advent offers us that, too.

Seize this moment. Grab hold. Make these days make a difference.

Prepare for something wondrous and new.

Prepare the way of the Lord!