

Sermon for 2nd week of Advent [Year B (Dec. 10th, 2017)]

I think we have all had the experience of being in the wrong. It may have been something as simple as speeding on the highway, or maybe you said something that you didn't really mean to hurt someone, but it did. Or got caught in a lie. Or perhaps it was a more serious pattern of behavior. Sometimes it takes a while to come to terms with it after a period of denial. Then you face up to what has happened. It always feels as if time slows down. Maybe your cheeks burn a little and maybe shame. Will things ever feel better? Will I ever get this burden off me?

That is the situation that Isaiah the prophet was describing in today's Old Testament reading, six centuries before the birth of Jesus. The Israelites, as a whole, had lost their way – especially their leaders. They had been chosen by God to be his special priestly people, his ambassadors to the rest of the world. He blessed them with the Ten Commandments and with the Temple worship in Jerusalem by which they could be restored and forgiven when they strayed. Slowly over time a subtle change had taken hold, from the top down: they no longer cared to be a people called to witness to the glory of God – but to their own glory. They were meant to be a kingdom of priests, a holy people, people who would spread the knowledge of God to the neighboring peoples. Israel – like we sometimes do – forgot who they were, what their blessings were for. They were on the verge of losing their Temple, their identity. Having become complacent, they had now been humbled.

Into the midst of this disaster, God sent the prophet Isaiah to proclaim comfort – forgiveness and restoration. Like most prophecies, a shorter-term fulfillment was promised: God would bring his people back to their land and they would rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. A longer-term fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled centuries later: "A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord!" St. Luke and the other Gospel writers saw this fulfillment in John the Baptist who appeared in the Judean desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness as a preparation for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah who would baptize with the Holy Spirit to bring a new beginning, a new covenant of an inwardly transformed heart and mind through his sacrifice on the Cross that would effectively bring forgiveness of sin.

While Jesus deals with human sin once for all, each of us must appropriate the mercy of God individually.

St. Peter in today's second reading makes the need for us to heed the call to repentance stark indeed. We live in anticipation of the Lord's return at the end of the world – or of our own individual lives. Are we living in this reality with a sense of urgency? Or with complacency, like the Israelites had been at the time of Isaiah?

Repentance for forgiveness is the first step of “preparing the way of the Lord” in our lives. The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers the perfect setting for individual repentance and forgiveness by God, in which the priest, himself a sinner, stands in for the Lord to declare absolution. Priests can sympathize and refrain from judgment because we are aware of our own failings. On Monday there is a special time set aside for priests to go to confession. Here in the parish there is a special time next Monday the 18th from 6 to 8 p.m. There will be two priests available to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The regular Saturday Reconciliation on the 23rd will also be extended to two hours starting at 1:30.

Let us prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him to come to our hearts this Christmas and so we can receive the Holy Spirit anointing He alone brings to our souls.