

2nd Sun Advent – 2019

The other day as I was picking out Christmas cards,.. I noticed that all of them showed a cute scene... like the baby Jesus in a stable surrounded by adoring angels ,... or the three wise men following the star to Bethlehem,...or jolly old St Nick in his red suit with a big sack filled with toys...But, I didn't see a single Christmas card that showed John the Baptist,...that desert prophet with a leather belt around his waist, and a camel's hair shirt....preaching fire and brimstone.. Can you imagine what a John the Baptist Christmas card would say?...It would probably go something like this: *"Greetings from our family at this special time of year... May these words from John the Baptist bring you Christmas cheer. ..'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near... You brood of vipers!...Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the unquenchable fire.'....Merry Christmas from the Tocci's."*

I don't think we're ever going to see John the Baptist Christmas cards...even though John does have a big part in our Advent journey toward Christmas day to celebrate the birth of Jesus...Every year in Advent, we hear about how people had come to the desert to see what John was all about and maybe get baptized by him,...and we hear John command them to *"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. ...Prepare the way of the Lord."*...John wasn't talking about preparing the way for Baby Jesus. That had already happened years earlier in Bethlehem...He was talking about the adult Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah,.. the Christ,...the One John would later point out to the people as *"the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."*...In our Gospel, John tells the people they have to repent of their sins because the Messiah would soon be coming into their midst.

Today, as we are getting ready to celebrate the **1st coming of Jesus** into the world, 2000 years ago ,...the Church sticks John the Baptist in our faces calling us to repent, to prepare for the **2nd coming** of Jesus at the end of the world...The Church gives us Advent season not only as a joyful time to journey to Bethlehem, the manger, Baby Jesus, Silent Night, peace on earth and all that,...but also to remind us that Jesus is going to return (in case we forgot)...In last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus warned us that we need to be prepared for His return because it would be on a day and an hour when we don't expect it.... Advent is a time to ask ourselves, ..." If Christ comes back today,...or if I breathe my last breath today,...will I be ready, or is there something I have to do, something I have to change to be better prepared to meet Him?"

Now, repenting is serious business... John told the people they must "produce good fruits as evidence of repentance,"...and warned them that trees that do not bear good fruit will be "cut down and thrown into the fire,"...which shows just how serious our God is about repentance...

Repentance is more than simply saying, “Lord, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. Please forgive me”.. Repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia* which literally means “to change one’s mind.”...It’s a 180° turnaround,.. a turning away from sin and turning to God. It’s a commitment to change the things we know God wants us to change... Being sorry and remorseful is necessary and good, ..but repentance has to be reflected in our actions, in what we do...That’s the hard part.

It’s kind of like the time when our daughter was very little, and she came to me with a painful little sliver in her finger...So, I took her into the bathroom and got out the needle and the tweezers, the first-aid spray, and a Band-Aid. ...She looked at all of this and in a trembling little voice said, "Daddy, I just want the Band-Aid.".. She wanted just the Band-Aid, because she knew those other things were going to hurt...Sometimes that’s how we are when we come to God with our sin... All we want is a Band-Aid – God’s forgiveness.... We want to skip the hard part, because we know it will hurt...The hard part involves making changes,..repairing any damage we have done,.. healing the hurts we have caused, ..overcoming our prejudices, conquering our addictions, mending broken relationships,...setting things right,.. and then asking the Holy Spirit to keep us moving in the right direction – toward God. That’s repenting.

Right about now, I’ll bet some of you are thinking: “OK, I know I have things I probably need to work on,...things I need to change...But, I’m trying to get into the Christmas spirit here – *‘Tis the season to be jolly!*’...So, why do we have to hear all this Repent stuff?...John the Baptist is almost as bad as the Grinch.”...Well, yeah, ...he is, if we hear only the REPENT part of what he preached...and not the whole thing...What he said was: “*Repent, ... for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.*”...It’s a bad news/good news thing...**Bad news is:** to be ready for the unknown day of Christ’s return,...you better check to see if you have some repenting to do. ...**Good news is:** by His dying on the cross and rising from the dead – Jesus has brought the Kingdom of heaven near... The Kingdom of Heaven is near. ...He made eternal life in Heaven a living HOPE for all those He finds worthy when He comes. ...You see, 1st we have to hear the bad news –REPENT - order to appreciate and benefit from the good news – THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR.

So, we shouldn’t be too hard on John...In fact, later in Matthew’s Gospel,...Jesus began His ministry in Galilee preaching the same words, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

My friends, we can use this Advent time to take an honest look at our lives,.. our thinking, .. our words,.. our actions, ...to see if we have anything that needs a complete U-turn...If we do, we are so blessed to have the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation through which the Lord will give us the grace, the will, and the strength we to make the necessary – maybe difficult - turn around and head in the right direction - His direction...

And, we do this not because we are bad, or defective, or unworthy,...but because we are worth it,...because we have been created in the image and likeness of God, and because God loves us,..and God – in Jesus Christ – is coming...He IS coming!...If we miss the truth and Good News in John's preaching, we will miss the Kingdom. ...Let's not let this happen, "For the Kingdom of heaven is near.",..and it's getting nearer and nearer every day!".. .Amen.