

Monsignor Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on December 10, 2006
Second Sunday of Advent – Liturgical Year C

Advent gives out a decidedly mixed message. Mixed? you ask. Yes.

First, it's a season of joyful waiting. As we say, "We wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ". Wait in joyful hope. That sounds just fine. I can deal with that. But then comes John the Baptist. The Gospel tells us he's preaching "repentance for the forgiveness of sins". Repentance? Sin? How does that sit down with waiting in joyful hope? Advent is a very mixed message.

...Or is it? Let's look more closely.

First - waiting. Waiting for me is not a very easy thing. It seems a waste of time. While I wait, my appointments slide into chaos. While I wait, my food gets cold. Yet Paul tells the Philippians that their waiting for the day of Christ is an experience filled with joy and hope. "Joyful waiting" is a hard sell where I'm concerned. It's an oxymoron, a contradiction.

Well, honestly, it depends on what I'm waiting for. Waiting for a late train and waiting for someone I love are very different kinds of waiting. Advent waiting has about it an element of certainty. We know Christ is coming. We even know that Christmas will surely come. We need to pay attention to that confidence that fills Paul's message in today's letter to the Philippians. Hear him again: "I am confident of this, that the one who began the good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus". There's Advent waiting. First of all, we are God's work. We need to pay attention to that during Advent. God worked in all the Advent characters: Zechariah, his wife Elizabeth, their son John the Baptist - and of course God worked in Mary. But God also started a good work in us. God worked in our families, in our teachers, in our parishes, in our friends. God works as well in our failures and disappointments, though that's harder to see. But it makes Paul's waiting quite joyful - to know that God began me as a good work.

Then, too, God is not finished. God is not finished with me. God is not finished with the church. God, who began my good work, will bring me and the church to a realization of joy beyond our imagining. Waiting is joyful hope. Advent invites us to that experience.

But how then to deal with John the Baptist? He has all that stuff about sin and repentance. Not very joyful at all.

But John is part of the message of hope. He is saying "change". Sure, it involves confronting past sins. Sure, it involves moving and changing. But remember - we're all works in progress. John is showing you and me how God bring his work to fulfillment. Some people are frightened by the prospect. But listen to Kathleen Norris in her book "The Cloister Walk". Maybe you've read it. She writes, "Repentance is not a popular word these days, but I believe that any of us recognize it when it strikes us in the gut. Repentance is coming to our senses, seeing - suddenly - what we've done that we might not have done - or recognizing that the problem is not in what we do but in what we become". Often enough, what we need to change is our value system. A great preacher once noted: "The world as we live in it is like a shop window into which some mischievous person has got overnight and shifted all the price labels - so that the cheap things have the high price labels on them and the really precious things are priced low. We let ourselves be taken in. Repentance means getting those price labels back in the right place."

I read recently a story about a closet slob. He couldn't comprehend being neat or clean. Why make a bed? You're only going back. Why put the cap back on the toothpaste? You catch the drift. His wife convinced him to enroll in a 12-step program for slobs. A therapist taught him how to put the toilet paper on the roll. He was a new man!

Then his wife went away for a week. You know what happened - back to the old ways he went. But no - something had happened. He could not live with the sink full overnight or the towels laying on the bathroom floor. What had happened? He'd simply been exposed to a higher standard of living.

That's Advent week two - waiting joyfully with confidence that God will complete us. Realizing that God's work may call for change, for a new way of seeing, for a new set of values, for a changed set of behaviors. For me or you, it may not be the dirty dishes or the toilet paper roll. What is it then?

Happy "waiting in joyful hope". God, after all, is not finished with me. That's really good news as we celebrate the Eucharist this morning.