

Make Straight His Paths
2nd Sunday of Advent (A)
(Mt 3:1-12)

In elementary school we had workbooks without lines. As we needed to do exercises, practicing words and letters, we had to manually draw the lines on the paper. And this required a *ruler*, because it was impossible to draw a straight line by ourselves.

In the task of preparing for the Lord's coming, the spiritual exercises likewise require a *ruler*, and this is John the Baptist. It is his role, as Isaiah prophesies, to "*make straight the paths of the Lord*" (Mt 3:3). The role of John the Baptist is an important one, and it continues in our lives today through the authority of the Church. By means of God's law, teaching, and discipline, the Church helps us to *rule*, or order our lives correctly, a task we could not accomplish by ourselves.

Left to our own efforts, we inevitably live crooked, disordered lives. We veer off course, we constantly fail to avoid the pitfalls of vices and achieve the balance of virtue.

Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas, a time to straighten our paths, and straighten up our lives. As John the Baptist did 2000 years ago, so we must do today.

First, we must make confession of our sins and repent, renewing the grace of baptism that first made us children of God and upright in His sight. This is what John did by his "pre-sacrament" of baptism in the Jordan after confessing sin. We must make every effort to go to confession this Advent, and look to this sacrament as a means of straightening what is crooked in us.

Second, we must dedicate ourselves to a time away from distractions. John made the people come out to him in the desert, leaving the towns and villages. There he could lead them in prayer and reflection on their lives, so that their baptism would be a real conversion. He was severely critical of the Pharisees, who though they were extremely religious, were perfunctory in their prayer and worship. Sin creeps into our lives when we become lazy and fall into habits of merely "going through the motions."

Advent requires real renewal of our prayer, and a true examination of our life on the spiritual level. Therefore we must find the time to avoid distractions, and escape the hectic frenzy of activity which seems to characterize this time of year.

To “make straight his paths” will likely require some exterior changes in our schedule and behavior, to remove obstacles which keep us from God, and God from ourselves. For instance, adjusting our lifestyle so that prayer and worship are not compromised or pressured by other activities. And it will likely require some interior changes, such as dealing with impatience or anger.

Straightening the paths between ourselves and God will go hand in hand with straightening the paths with others, with family, “my neighbor.” Love of God and fellow man are inseparable. The primary guide for our Advent spiritual tasks is the harmony that needs to be achieved with the other people in my life. As Isaiah says in the first reading, “*the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, and the cow and the bear shall be neighbors*” (Is 11:6-9).

The role of John the Baptist continues today through the work of the Church: the ministry of clergy, the preaching of Scripture, the teaching of sacred doctrine, the celebration of sacraments. Let us rule our lives accordingly, ordering them by God’s law, and opening up the direct path for God to come and dwell within us, among us.