



December 14, 2008 • Third Sunday of Advent

Pastor's Column

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John the Baptist—The Voice Crying Out in the Wilderness

John the Baptist takes on a central role in the story and the journey of Advent. He came into our Scriptures in last Sunday's Gospel and we hear of him again this weekend.

I share with you the "Second Sunday of Advent" homily of Deacon Greg Kandra from Forest Hills, New York. His words gave me a deeper insight into the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus and prepares the way for us. May you find challenge and comfort in the Deacon's thoughts:

This Sunday, after a week of turkey sandwiches, turkey casserole, turkey a la king, turkey burgers, turkey pot pie and turkey surprise...locusts and honey is starting to sound pretty good.

We are here in the second Sunday of Advent—in the desert, with a strange and disheveled figure dining on strange food and proclaiming that we need to make ourselves ready for the Lord.

We tend to think of John the Baptist as the Voice—the forerunner, the prophet, the one crying in the wilderness.

And he is.



But I'd like us to think of him another way this particular Sunday. This man is a figure of great hope. More than an ominous, fearsome figure, he is also, to my mind, the Saint of Second Chances.

He wanders into the desert of our lives and invites us to start over.

Appropriately, we are entering into a liturgical cycle where we will be reading the gospel of Mark—the gospel most scholars believe was the very first one written. And we start with the same words that start the book of Genesis: "The beginning."

And the message from the beginning? Make yourselves new. Begin again. Something is about to happen that will change everything. This is your chance at a fresh start, to make things right with God.

That is John the Baptist's message—the message of the Saint of Second Chances.

And like second chances, he doesn't necessarily appear when or how we expect him to. This preacher isn't Joel Osteen in a silk suit and an air-conditioned arena. John the Baptist is rough and wild and frightening, yelling in the desert.

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But then again, God doesn't always enter into our lives when or how we want him to.

The other day I read the story of a 16-year-old Korean boy named Philip Kim. During the Korean War, he was one of many boys rounded up and arrested for refusing to join the People's Volunteer Army of North Korea. They took him to prison and were going to execute him. Philip Kim stood there, lined up with other boys, facing a wall, and he closed his eyes, waiting for the gunshot that would end his life.

But at the last minute, an officer yelled for them to stop. The soldier noticed that one of the other boys lined up against the wall was holding a rosary, and was praying. The execution was called off. The boys were spared.

That moment changed everything. Philip wasn't a Christian. But he never forgot what happened, what had saved his life. Not long after, he converted and came to America. He married, raised a family, became active in his local Catholic church. He settled in San Antonio, Texas, where he opened his home to other Korean immigrants to hold Mass. Those Masses led him to help found the first Korean Catholic Church in San Antonio.

His love for the church led him eventually to being ordained a deacon. Several years later, his wife died after a long battle with breast cancer. Before she died, she gave Philip her blessing to become a priest. And he did. He was ordained at the age of 72. Last week, tragically, Fr. Philip Kim died in a car accident. He was 76.

He owed his remarkable life to a second chance nearly 60 years ago. And he didn't let it get away. He made his life matter.

What about the rest of us?

During this season of Advent, John the Baptist calls out to us, imploring us. You have another chance, he tells us. Seize it. Repent. Prepare. To paraphrase Isaiah: level the mountains and fill the valleys. Make what is crooked straight.

Like the boy facing a wall, and facing death...we can start over.

So, think of those mountains and valleys, those winding roads that cut through every life. And think of the wild and untamed man in the desert. He tells us it's not too late to change.

He is the saint of "I'm sorry. Let's talk."

He is the saint of "Where did I go wrong?" and "How can I make this right?"

He is the saint of "I'm addicted and I need help."

He is the saint of "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

He is the saint of the slammed door being re-opened...the phone being picked up...the fences being mended...the wound being healed.

Last week, we began not just the season of Advent, but a new liturgical year. So consider this a time for making New Year's resolutions. For resolving to live differently. Resolving to make room for God.

Listen to the Saint of Second Chances—and take hold of every one that comes your way.

The dark days of December, after all, are not ending.

As Mark reminds us, they are "The beginning."

