

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Advent
December 7, 2014

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Advent presents the message of *two prophets*. One looked *far ahead*. He foresaw a time of fulfillment of God's promises, when the Desire of All Nations shall come. Because of this man's prophecies, and especially *the singing beauty* of his expression of them, many people of good will waited for the Messiah, holding this hope in their hearts. The prophet's name was Isaiah.

The other man exhorted his hearers to no longer shade their eyes and gaze far head. Instead, he asked men of good will to look around. He said, "There standeth one among you whom you know not." This man's message was definitely *not* one of singing beauty! He used rough language. He intended to shock. His message was urgent because the time is *now*. The prophet's name was John. Isaiah and John the Baptist are the Advent prophets.

Saint John's preaching urged the people to recall the truth the Messiah must be accepted as a *personal Saviour* before He can become a national deliverer. On that call, John was picking up something from Isaiah's playbook. When he said, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," Isaiah was not describing a national highway project! Isaiah's message was aimed at individual souls.

The assertion of the Christian gospel is there is such a corruption in the souls of men we have to actually prepare the way to make room for Christ. This is the message up front in the very first lines of Saint Mark's Gospel. Both Isaiah and John the Baptist tell us that souls are a wilderness of tangled and crooked paths.

Who can ever number the crooked ways of a soul? Who can total up the numbers of our compromises with the world and its spirit, the insincerity of our personal relationships, our habits of self-pity, self-deceptions, and self-exoneration, and our lack of honesty with our own conscience and with our God? There is One Person Who has totaled it all up. That is why we call Jesus *The Man of Sorrows*. Our Lord knows (and Isaiah and John want *us* to know) all these crooked ways are what impede our communion with the One Who saves. The crooked ways must be made straight.

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When we repent we are doing much more than confessing our sins and expressing sorrow for them. Repentance also involves the active removing of the blinding factors in our lives that perpetuate the cycle of crooked ways. False values include false perceptions which inspire false actions. Souls that are victims to this cycle spin in a self-contained world of ignorance and isolation. Repentance is what breaks the cycle and clears the air. Then we can see how our actions and the values behind them either conformed to, or digressed from, the law of Christ.

Do those who repent fall again into sin? The Lord Jesus gave the answer. He provided the Sacrament of Penance. Penance is the post-baptismal remedy for sin. If baptism were a commodity to be sold, then confession is Christ's promise, "We service what we sell! If that sounds like a car salesman's pitch, you are not far from the truth! Christians are those who the more they cooperate with Christ's grace the more aware they are of their need for that saving grace. And you and I notice it is a universal characteristic of the people we call *saints* that they who have gone furthest to rid themselves of sin felt most thoroughly to be sinners. Because they have drawn close to Jesus the Perfect One, saints are acutely aware of how they have let down the One they love. Because Almighty God is loving and gracious and merciful, this condition does not lead to despair. It leads to holy joy in the Lord.

Both Isaiah and John the Baptist called on all people to reconnect with the old ways of the Lord. They were told to turn away from the false and deceitful ways of the world and ground themselves once more in the true faith of the Word of God taught by the patriarchs. Doing that, Isaiah said, was "making the way straight." And as John proclaimed, the open road invites the approach of the Saviour.