

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Advent  
December 10, 2017

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The Advent season puts the spotlight on two prophets. One of these looked far ahead to a time of fulfillment of God's promises. He declared the Desire of All Nations shall come. Because of this man's prophecies, and especially the *singing beauty* by which he expressed them, people of good will waited for the Messiah. They held this hope in their hearts. The prophet's name of course was Isaiah.

The other man said it was too late to shade their eyes and gaze far into the future. Instead of looking ahead, he asked men of good will to *look around*. "There standeth one among you whom you know not." This man's message was definitely *not* one of singing beauty! It was rough, and intending to shock. His message was urgent because, as he said, the time is *now*. The prophet's name was John. The prophets of Advent are Isaiah and John the Baptist.

Saint John reminded the nation the Messiah must be accepted as a *personal* Saviour before He can become a national deliverer. That part of his message picked up on something from Isaiah's playbook. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" was not calling for a national highway project! Isaiah's message was *aimed at souls*.

We are told in the very first lines of Saint Mark's Gospel there is such corruption in the souls of men we have to actually prepare the way. We have to make room for Christ. Both Isaiah and John the Baptist tell us souls are a wilderness of tangled and crooked paths.

Who can ever number the crooked ways of a soul? Not any veteran confessor I know. Who can total up the numbers of our compromises with the world and its spirit. Think about the insincerity of our person relationships and our habits of self-pity, self-deception, and self-exoneration. Think of our lack of honesty with our own conscience and with our God! But there is One Person Who has totaled it all up. That is why we name Him *The Man of Sorrows*. And Our Lord Jesus knows (and Isaiah and John want *us* to know) that 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, expressing contrition, and promising amendment. Repentance involves the active removing of the blinding factors that feed the cycle of crooked ways. False values include false perceptions. They actually inspire false actions. Souls that are victims to this cycle spin in a self-contained world of ignorance and isolation. Repentance is what breaks this cycle and clears the air. Only then can we see how our actions and the values behind them conform to, or digress from, the law of Christ.

Do those who repent fall again into sin? The Lord Jesus gave us the answer. He provided the Sacrament of Penance as the post-baptismal remedy for sin. If baptism were a commodity for sale, then Christ's promise about confession could sound like the new-car salesman who says, "we service what we sell!" Christians are those who, the more they progress in discipleship the more aware they are of their need for Christ's maintenance program. It is a universal characteristic of the people we call "saints" that they who have gone furthest in the cultivation of virtue felt themselves most thoroughly to be sinners. Because they have drawn close to Jesus they are acutely aware of how they have let down the One they love.

Both Isaiah and John called on all people to reconnect with the old ways. Turn away from the false and deceitful ways of the world, and ground yourselves in the true faith of the Word of God taught by the patriarchs. Doing that, Isaiah said, was "making the way straight." And John proclaimed the open road invites the approach of the Saviour.