

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 6, 2020

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Two of the three major Advent saints were prophets. The Mass readings during this season give us their message. One of these prophets looked far into the future, to a time of fulfillment of God's promises. It was a time when "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, holding this hope in their hearts. The prophet's name was Isaiah.

The other man did not exhort his hearers to look ahead. He said, *look around you*. "There standeth one among you whom you know not." This prophet's message was not delivered with singing beauty. It was rough and intending to shock. His message was urgent because the time is *now*. The prophet's name was John. The prophets of Advent are Isaiah and John the Baptist.

Saint John's preaching urged the nation 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 on 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 construction project! *Isaiah's message was aimed at souls*.

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

Who can ever number the crooked ways of a soul? Can someone 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? One Person has done this. He totaled it all up. Which is why we call Him *The Man of Sorrows*. And Our Lord Jesus 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, with *contrition* expressing our sorrow for them for the sake of the One Who loves us, and *resolution* promising not to repeat our bad actions. Repentance also involves *amendment*, cooperating with God's grace to actively remove the blinding factors in our lives which perpetuate the cycle of cooked ways. False values include false perceptions which inspire false actions. And souls 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. And when that happens we can see how our actions, and the values behind, them conformed to, or digressed 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 brand-new *Chevrolet*, then confession is the new-car salesman's assurance "we service what we sell!" Christians are those who are aware of their need for Christ's saving grace. Jesus means "He Who saves." It is a universal characteristic of the people we call saints that they who have gone furthest to cultivate virtue felt themselves most thoroughly to be sinners. Because they have drawn close to Jesus they were acutely aware of how they have let down the One they love. But their lives are full of joy, not sadness, because they know such a gracious Saviour.

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