

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

You may be familiar with the phrase, “God writes straight with crooked lines.” Actually, it’s part of a larger quote from the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the late Archbishop of Chicago. He said, “If we let him, God can write straight with crooked lines. To put it another way... the good and the bad are always present in our human condition, and, that if we 'let go', if we place ourselves totally in the hands of the Lord, the good will prevail.”

As we celebrate today the 2nd Sunday of Advent, I think this phrase and idea very much sums up the Scripture readings we just heard.

For example in the first reading, we hear from the Old Testament prophet Baruch, who was writing about the Jewish people who had been carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. Baruch says, “Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever...Led away on foot by their enemies they left you: but God will bring them back to you...For God has commanded that every lofty mountain be made low, and that the age-old depths and gorges be filled to level ground...”

What's interesting to note here is that during their captivity, one of tasks the Israelites were enslaved to do was build roads for the Babylonian king. Now back then they didn't have dynamite to change the lay of the land. So, in order to build roads, they would have to lower hills and fill in the valleys to build the "King's Road". And so in a message of hope, the Prophet Baruch is saying that God Himself will one day lower the hills and the fill in the valleys for the Israelites so that they would be able to take this God-built path back home to Jerusalem. The point is that God would use the crooked lines of their captivity – the very sign of their enslavement – to rescue them and bring them straight home from this cruel deportation.

This phrase of Cardinal Bernardin's also helps explain our Gospel today too. Here, in our passage from St. Luke, we hear the following words said about the ministry of St. John the Baptist: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth..." Now this time, hundreds of years later, the Jews were not held in captivity in Babylon, so you might wonder, "Why do we hear the same language about leveling hills and filling valleys?"

Well, we're told today that John was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" all around the area of the Jordan River. The Jordan River is significant. When was the last time the Israelites were on the banks of the Jordan? At the end of their exodus – after they had wandered in the desert for 40 years in search of the Promised Land – after being enslaved in Egypt for a very long time. And so again, God is using the crooked lines of their history to usher them straight into the Promised Land. But this time, it's not simply an earthly home God is preparing after slavery to the Egyptians. But rather, through the Messiah that John the Baptist is proclaiming, God wants to usher them into the very Kingdom of heaven after they have endured slavery to sin and a sentence of death.

You know, many times God's ways look like crooked lines to us, and our preferences and wills and plans and desires look like the straight lines. But, the problem is that we don't have the same perspective that God does. It's kind of like how the earth doesn't look very curved until you take a ride on a plane or even a space shuttle. I guess that's why for so long people thought the earth was flat and that Christopher Columbus was crazy!

But because God has the whole plan in sight, He knows how to ultimately guide us along the 'straight-and-narrow' by taking us through, what sometimes appear to be, rather crooked situations. In fact, just like He did with the Israelites, when He used the sign of enslavement as the sign of their freedom, and just like He did with the people of John the Baptist's time, when He used the sign of their past as the sign of their future, so God does with us.

Often God takes the difficult situations we find ourselves in in life, or the personal struggles and weaknesses we battle against, to show us the way. Take for example repentance of our sins. When we come before God in the sacrament of Reconciliation, the sins we confess become opportunities for Jesus to forgive us and give us His healing grace. The thing is Confession can feel as awkward as the very image of writing *straight* with *crooked* lines looks. But, if God wants to heal us from our sins in this way – and He does – then we need to trust Him and not fight Him. And then we will begin to experience the truth, as Cardinal Bernardin put it, that although the good and the bad are always present in our lives ...if we just 'let go', we will see how placing ourselves firmly in the hands of the Lord always allows the good to prevail in us. God bless you.