

Second Sunday of Advent – Year B

In 1984 I arrived in Switzerland to begin my studies for the priesthood. The month before I arrived, Pope John Paul II visited Switzerland. Not only that, he visited the very city, Fribourg, where I would be living. And if that wasn't enough, he actually visited the very Franciscan friary where I would be living! I just missed seeing him by a month!

But the effects of his visit were still evident. The friary was so clean, for one thing! No cobwebs lurking in the corners, no grime on the windows, all the plates and silverware matched. And it was in probably the best repair it had been in in decades. The friars had gone all out to make a good impression. Who wouldn't have?

The admonition in today's first reading tells us to "make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God." The sentiment is the same: someone of extreme importance is coming. The way should be made ready for him. I don't know this for a fact, but I can imagine that the city of Fribourg checked out the route the pope would be taking and made sure that there were no potholes that needed to be filled, or debris in the road. The way should be free of obstacles.

The pope was paying a courtesy call to the Catholic community in Switzerland, but the preparations Isaiah has in mind are for something much bigger: "Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by his strong arm; here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care."

More than simply making a courtesy call, the Lord comes to save us! To be sure, there are some things only the Lord can do. The victory over death, for example, is his alone to win. We are pure beneficiaries of that saving work. But the admonition to make things ready, which is echoed in today's Gospel, does indicate that those things, those obstacles that are in our power to remove from the way, those things must go. Our

role in the larger work of salvation is to focus on what we can do, and then to be about doing them.

John the Baptist saw the first step in that work was to repent of the wrong we had done, to make a clean start. But John recognized that the call to repentance was not the whole story. He admitted, “One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The power of the Holy Spirit, which has already been given to us, enables us to engage in more common work than simply repenting of our sins. Gifts like wisdom and understanding and fortitude give us the capability of engaging in larger projects, removing more substantial barriers to the coming of the Lord; things like removing anything that takes away from anyone’s life the possibility of living that life in keeping with the his or her God-given dignity. Sometimes that will require charity and corporal works of mercy. Sometimes it will require heavier lifting and addressing things like persistent injustice and long-standing arrangements, formal or informal, that oppress people.

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None of this is something we have to do alone. God is with us even now. But he has more in store for us. His hopes for us are greater than what has been realized so far. We can let ourselves be caught up in that great hope of God and not settle for things as they are, even if they have been that way for as long as we can remember.

Salvation is close at hand. Can we reach out and embrace it? Can we put right the things that are wrong and make the way smooth for the Lord's coming?