

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths” (Mk 1:3). Advent is a time for us to prepare for the second coming of Christ. Jesus was born into the world 2,000 years ago. In a certain sense, he has never left us. He is present in Sacred Scripture. He is present wherever 2 or 3 gather in his name. He is present in the Eucharist. The bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” When he comes again in glory at the end of time, there will be death and judgement for the entire world. Purgatory will cease to be and one is either going to experience the eternal joy of heaven or the everlasting agony of hell. This past week, the Fairbanks clergy held a citywide retreat on death, judgement, heaven, and hell. Although we await the second coming of Christ with joyful anticipation, the more likely outcome is that we will meet Jesus, the just judge, sooner rather than later when our own earthly life comes to an end.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” John the Baptist called people to repent and to turn back to God. The Boy Scout motto is to always be prepared and I would encourage you to take advantage of the sacrament of reconciliation whenever you can. Several years ago, we held a penance service one evening. One man who had asked God for the forgiveness of his sins was prepared when his life ended in a tragic accident the very next day.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” It is hard to be prepared for death whether it comes suddenly like a thief in the night or more slowly after a long illness. In 2013 when my own father had been diagnosed with cancer, Bishop Don encouraged me to travel back east so I could be with my father as he struggled against cancer. He was filled with trust that God would see him through to the other side of cancer.

What a blessing. I was able to celebrate Mass for my father each day, anoint him frequently, and sit nearby as he gradually lost strength and lost the battle. Bolstered by my father and mother’s faith, I held onto false expectations a miracle would allow for full recovery.

His death came as a shock and hit me hard. I experienced the pain that always accompanies death when a loved one passes. In offering his funeral Mass, I was clearly strengthened by many priests and parishioners around the country praying for my father and I. Composed to preside at Mass, I held back my own tears.

I returned home but grieved for months. I felt an emptiness. I was disappointed with God for not sparing my father. Four months later, I attended a retreat. Abbot Gregory spoke about God the Father and it helped me to refocus on my relationship with God. His spiritual talks helped me recognize the gift of my own father was only possible because of God the Father who had never left me. The tears began to flow.

Two years later, I headed back to Maryland to begin working on my father’s request to organize his poetry. Scanning 2100 poems, hundreds of letters, and sorting through 50 feet of paper was part of the hard work of organizing his poetry, but it was a bit draining. In 2015, I needed the break from the grind, and it worked out quite well that Bishop Chad asked me to come to Fairbanks and begin ministry at the Cathedral.

When I returned to Maryland 3 years later to resume the work, it took me a while to get back into the swing of things. Then I spent two months at Saint Mary Seminary which helped me to work with an English Professor in a prayerful environment. We both talked about our own fathers, and slowly My Father’s Life in Poetry began to take shape.

Over time, I came to realize, that the daunting task of organizing my father’s poetry was another gift that he selflessly gave to me. I know my father better now for having wrapped my mind around his work and his life. Had my father lived, I would not know him as well today as I do now. The peace I lacked at his passing has come over time with the recognition that my father has not left me but continues to offer guidance from the Kingdom of Heaven.

In our psalm we pray, “Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.” God is always broadcasting, but we are not always tuned in. To hear what God proclaims and to internalize that peace, we must “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.”

This past Friday as I was working on a radio homily for Saturday, my father was there for me once again. I couldn’t help but think of all the hidden ways a father helps shape and build our character. During Advent, people spend great effort and a fair amount of money in getting gifts for one another. This is the way the world prepares. But is it the way God wants us to prepare?

Our life is a gift from God. What we do with our lives is our gift back to God. Be generous. Share God’s gifts freely. And especially in this season of preparation, never forget the “gift of self.”

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