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Second Sunday of Advent  
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Lectionary Year B: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

People from the Midwest, generally speaking, are accustomed to straight roads. For some, these straight roads are a much-appreciated fixture of ordered and simple Midwestern life. For others, they're just one more reflection of the Midwest's bland, vast monotony. After all, how exciting is it to drive on roads with few or no curves?

Several states, including my home state of North Dakota and, to a lesser extent, Indiana have added "rumble strips" to their highways, which make a vibrating noise whenever a driver veers either too close to the center or too close to the shoulder. I figured they might've been intended to reawaken drivers who had fallen asleep due to curveless roads and bleak landscapes. As a North Dakota native, I can get away with saying something like that...

Interestingly, the Autobahns of Germany were designed according to a much different paradigm; they have regularly-occurring curves so as to prevent drivers from being lulled into inattention (and possibly slumber). In the Midwest, curves tend to appear only when absolutely necessary, like when the terrain dictates them, or when the land survey includes a correction line, which is a surveying tool to keep sections of land as square as possible and yet compensate for the curvature of the earth. Curving and/or angling roads, particularly in areas with heavy agricultural activity, would result in irregularly-shaped portions of land, which is what the land survey system sought to minimize in the first place.

The only enterprise granted the privilege of cutting across the country at any angle or in any direction was the railroad. The Pacific Railroad Act, signed by

President Lincoln in 1862, gave railroads ten square miles of land on each side of proposed trackage for every mile of proposed trackage. This gave the railroads considerably greater leeway in determining their routes, so that the train, to this day in much of the Midwest, will make a straight shot northwest from one town to the other while you, the motorist, must drive west and then north to travel between the same two points. To use the Pythagorean Theorem, the railroad takes the hypotenuse of the triangle, while the roads take the sides of the triangle.

Straight roads, square tracts of land, and the division of the countryside into townships and ranges all stem from the Public Land Survey System, for which Thomas Jefferson usually receives credit, as all the land acquired by the United States following the Revolutionary War needed to be surveyed and divided up in an orderly fashion. While many Midwesterners regard "mile roads" and "sections" and "quarter sections" as established fixtures of rural life, no such fixtures existed prior to the development of the Public Land Survey System. In fact, irregularly-shaped pieces of land and meandering roads are the norm in what are now referred to as the thirteen original colonies.

Of course, this system that many have grown to appreciate works best in areas that are flat and relatively uncluttered -- like Indiana...or North Dakota. And that leads me to think of this landscape as an ideal Advent landscape. Straight roads. Even terrain. Few obstructions. These are the means by which we prepare the way of the Lord.

And today, we turn our attention to the chief "preparer" -- John the Baptist. From the Advent texts featuring John the Baptist, we get the image of an almost feral desert prophet -- wild and more than a bit unsettling. Lest we get hung up on the apparently wild and unsettling persona of John the Baptist, though, let us look to today's Gospel text, in particular, for those things that relate more

specifically to the season of Advent.

If the main focus of Advent is preparation, then we might want to consider how this preparation is executed. John the Baptist's arrival on the scene is, in the Gospel of Mark, sudden and dramatic. Preparation here means confessing one's sins and being baptized. Now, we can't draw the line from this text directly to us, as one of those things -- baptism -- happens only once according to the teachings of our Church. But there is a way in which we can retain the spirit of John the Baptist's call, and that is in the act of repentance.

Repentance is, some might argue, a "churchy" word that calls to mind old-fashioned, fiery preachers who really put the fear of the Lord in people. But biblical scholars and theologians tend to view repentance in light of the Greek word metanoia, which could be translated as "changing of mind." That isn't so much the giving up of bad habits and vices (as the fiery preachers of yore tended to put it), but rather the complete re-orientation of one's life and beliefs. It's a "change of mind" that's so profound that one acts, perceives, and believes 180 degrees opposite from before.

A rather tall order for people who can't adjust to their new cell phones or portable electronic devices!

But, wait a minute...there must be a way to repent that's within an ordinary person's reach! Earlier, I mentioned the Public Land Survey System, which gave us the neatly platted land that is so familiar to those of us from the Midwest. Well, you might think of repentance as a time to "survey" the "land" of your heart and mind. Where your boundaries are jagged or indefinite, correct them. Where your paths meander, straighten them. Where your landscape is harsh and wild, develop it. Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for

our God'" (Isaiah 40:3).

These words are spot-on, as our paths are anything but straight this time of year, and as our landscapes are filled with noise and visual pollution -- not to mention the continued suffering and anxiety brought on by a pandemic. Surely, John the Baptist wasn't dealing with people who were just like us; times and cultures have changed much since he preached repentance. But, nonetheless, he is calling us to apply this message to a jagged, indefinite, meandering, harsh, and wild twenty-first century, fraught with tendencies toward worry, hopelessness, greed, and jealousy...and sometimes understandably.

Advent, however, is a season of hope. With all the straightening, correcting, and developing that I have talked about today, you might be left with the impression that this season is somber and joyless. On the contrary, we look forward as much as we look inward during Advent. Yes, the inward glance is for taking that survey of the things that get in the way of preparing the way. But remember, too, that we are looking forward with a hope-filled anticipation of Christ coming to us. It's all about making it easier for Christ to arrive in our hearts and minds. Give him a straight road. Give him a well-surveyed piece of land. Clear it of clutter, and let him live in you.

Straight roads. Even terrain. Few obstructions. That may be due to the nature of the land and the way it was surveyed; indeed, that may be you. There's an inner geography to be surveyed, too, and knowing Christ's place in it begins with him claiming you and you opening yourself to him. Is that a "change of mind"? Is that repentance? Sure is. Appreciating what Christ did for you will help you make a straight road for him a whole lot easier...

Amen.