

The Second Sunday of Advent
The Gospel of St. Matthew 3: 1-12

Two images of trees come from the Scriptures for this Sunday. Isaiah images a shoot emerging from the stump of the tree of Jesse. In the Gospel, John the Baptist talks of getting the axe to the root of a tree determining what good fruits are present before the decision is made to chop it down or allow it to remain.

Jesse was the father of King David and the stump of Jesse's tree indicates the infidelities of various kings of David's lineage and the end of the line for any more kings. The shoot from the stump recognizes God's steady fidelity which will be manifested in new life coming from the old stump.

My spiritual director in the seminary could get the axe to the root quicker than anyone could imagine. She was kind and generous but could be tough as nails when needed. She was insightful and got to the heart of the matter quickly without mincing words or playing games. She asked all her directees to critique an article regarding various methods of spiritual direction. I was not impressed with the article assigned to me and wrote a rather scathing opinion-laden critique. Some might say I was even harsh and polemic regarding the text.

Her remarks on my paper included: "good use of sources and well written but please remember that papal infallibility does not extend down to seminarians." I was not expecting that remark nor did I appreciate the comment. It was unexpected and unwelcomed. As said earlier, she could get the axe to the root quicker than anyone. When I entered the seminary I was 6'2." She got the axe to the root and this is what is left! It was also the most essential and necessary comment for the development of my spiritual life. I needed to see how other people saw me and how I needed to get off my high horse. I needed to be more responsive to life and less reactive. All those things were made known by that one comment.

We need John the Baptist types to speak what we need to hear even when it is not what we want to hear. I am not talking about the person who is always critical and is not known for ever being supportive. Rather this is the person who really has our best interests at heart, cares about us, and wants the best for us and from us. It could be a spouse, a parent, a son or daughter, a priest confessor, spiritual director, supervisor at work and hopefully, at times, a best friend.

If you haven't had a John the Baptist experience in your life, maybe you have been immaculately conceived or maybe you are living in denial. As individuals, as church, as community, and as a nation, we need strong prophetic voices that cut us no slack and tolerate no excuses, minimizing or justifying sinful behavior. They won't let us off the hook easy with excuses such as "well I'm only human," or "everyone's doing it," or "it doesn't really hurt anyone," or any other excuse.

Repentance allows God's grace to root out of all that is not of God, so that our entire life can be filled with all that is of God. In this way, we can say that our God is a jealous God and wants to fill every part and crevice of our humanity with divine life. God is not satisfied with only part of us or even most of our humanity. God wants it all and repentance allows God to possess all that we are. Repentance and conversion is a lifelong process and is absolutely dependent on God's grace.

This rooting out is symbolized in the Scriptures this weekend. "Even now the axe lies at the root of the tree." We need to put an axe to all our resentments, our attitudes of prejudice, our behaviors of darkness. Any blindness towards injustice, any comfort with inequality, and any indifference to human suffering must fall with the swipe of the axe.

Advent's penitential focus, the preaching of John the Baptist, calls for the need to humanize our communities again. Each one of us and each community: parish, neighborhood, workplace,

town, nation, and community of nations needs constant transformation to what is truly human. The more human we become, the more divine we become. The more we become the person God created us to be, the more we are filled with the very life of God.

We need to repent of “relativism.” We heard Pope Benedict XVI constantly reject relativism. What is relativism? Relativism holds there is no real truth. Your truth is as good as mine. One theory is as good as another. All opinions are of equal dignity and respect. This is completely false.

Holders of opinions share equal dignity and respect but their opinions do not. Adolph Hitler’s views on race and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s views on race are not of equal dignity and do not deserve equal respect. Adolf Hitler and Rev. King shared equal dignity and respect as human beings and as persons regardless of how they lived out their human lives. But their opinions do not share equality as such.

All opinions and all of our attitudes must be judged by the light of the gospel. We must constantly let the light of the Gospel raise our attitudes, opinions, choices, and habits of the heart for discernment and transformation.

Jesus came and forged new paths of forgiveness and peace along the old roads of violence, hatred, and vengeance. The way of the cross is the new path. The wood of new life sprouting from Jesse’s tree and the axe leveling the tree at its roots are now formed into the wood of the cross and laid on the shoulders of the Savior.

His solidarity with the oppressed, those unjustly condemned, the powerless and the forgotten become the measure of how we judge opinions, theories, and proposed solutions to the difficult and complex problems we face together as church, as a nation, and as a community of nations.

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and critic of the state, and never its tool.” Pope Francis has issued many a challenge to the community of nations regarding war, refugees, and the vast inequalities across our planet. He has been especially alarmed with the rapid ecological dangers of global warming and human responsibility for much of that warming. He has been a strong prophetic voice of conscience on this issue.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis writes, “These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness. The problem is that we still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations. The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable; otherwise, the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice.”

And to the International Conference on Climate Change, the Holy Father said, “The present situation of environmental degradation, strongly connected with human, ethical and social degradation (Encyclical *Laudato Si’*, 48.56.122) which, unfortunately, we experience daily, questions all of us, each one with his own roles and competencies, and it leads us to be gathered here with a renewed sense of awareness and responsibility. The style of life based on the disposable culture is unsustainable and must have no room in our models of development and of education.”

On the issue of global warming as well as other critical issues of justice, the axe is at the root and the tree is being examined for fruits of good works.