

Today we are on the second week of Advent. The prophet we heard in the first reading is speaking of the “strong arm” of the Holy One not as one that punishes but as one that has strength to gather up all the lambs, to hold them close to God’s breast, gently leading them home.

This is the glad tidings: that God’s power is that of a tender shepherd, holding close all those who feel broken and vulnerable, leading them out of their desert places, and guiding them along God’s way.

The new beginning John the Baptist announces has everyone abuzz. The free gift of forgiveness awaits any who acknowledge their sins and let God’s grace wash over them. This fresh start is brought to completion by the One coming after John, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The opening verse of the gospel, “the beginning of the good news,” reprises the first line of Genesis. Mark raises our expectations that God is doing something new with the coming of Jesus; a new creation that begins again in our own day, every time we turn to God and let our hearts be moved to follow the “straight way.”

The message of John the Baptist to all of us is to prepare.

The kind of preparation about which he speaks is not found at the shopping mall as we do Christmas shopping. It is the much deeper preparation of our life and soul for Christ. John speaks about preparing the way for the Lord, in terms of getting rid of the bumps and holes in our life to make a straight path for the Lord.

Site preparation is very important before any building is started. Without proper site preparation, a building will lean, sink or even collapse. Spiritual site preparation is what John the Baptist is calling us to do.

Are we willing to do the site preparation? Are we willing to get rid of the potholes and bumps in our life? What are we willing to give up in order to prepare for solid spiritual construction in our lives?

The deeper Christmas, which is a rebirth of fidelity to the Lord Jesus, a deeper appreciation of our Christian dignity and mission, a renewed welcoming of Christ and His Gospel into our life requires preparation. Renewal in our life or in the Church requires repentance; renewal and repentance always go together.

In the middle of this Advent season, let us make ours these words of John the Baptist and his message of repentance because he keeps us real.

He reminds us that we should be getting ready not just for another holiday season but to renew our lives in the power of Christ by getting rid of the obstacles that block our full experience of the Lord’s grace and power in our lives. He reminds us that we can change. He calls us again this year in this crowded Christmas season to take away one or two stones or boulders that block the full flow of grace into our life. He prepares us not for temporary seasonal cheer but for deep joy in the Lord that comes from experiencing release from sin and new life in Christ. John the Baptist’s message of repentance carries the promise of a new life, a new future in Christ that is now open to each one of us.

With John the Baptist, Christmas will be not just a holiday season but a healing season as well.