

2nd Sunday of Advent cycle C
December 10, 2006

Whenever I fly, I do all in my power to get a window seat, all in my power at least this side of trying to intimidate the person by the window to switch seats with me. But for me, the window can be the entertainment for the entire flight: I love watching the runway zip past, watch the ground get farther and farther away; I like to look down at the highways, the cars, the crops, and the cities. One might think that mountains would be interesting to look at from an airplane; but my experience has been, not so much. From the air, they look more like speed bumps than huge, majestic hills; from up above, you really can't appreciate their steepness. And you can see the roads, winding their way through the valleys, and around the peaks; from up in the air, it looks as though someone could just take those roads and straighten them out; build them from town to town as the crow flies, and just go over the tops of those mountains. On the ground, though, we get a different perspective, and actually a more realistic one. On the ground, we look up those mountains, and see how steep they really are; on the ground, we imagine how exhausted we would be from a climb straight up them. On the ground, it makes more sense to go around the mountain and probably takes less time. They are that huge of obstacles to cross on a person's journey.

The fall of man was such a pivotal event because it not only estranged man from God; it also put up obstacle after obstacle that would make it more difficult for us to reach God again. When God created man, he gave him many enjoyments in paradise; man was to use these gifts of God wisely, and in accord with his will. But then man sinned. And those same enjoyments turned into allurements, pleasures which man would not necessarily use wisely, and not necessarily use in accordance with God's will. The allurements stand in our way now like mountains, which we must either climb over, or go around, or grind our way through; but if we cast our lives to the allurements of this world, we will not reach God. Even before the fall, Satan was the great enemy of man: hated man precisely because of his relationship with God, and the fact that man had the opportunity to grow in that relationship which Satan had rejected forever. But beginning with the fall, the enemy would also be the tempter; and for the rest of man's days, he would be an obstacle to our holiness, filling our minds and hearts with all sorts of lies about God, lies about our purpose for being here, and lies about what is our ultimate good. God made us creatures who enjoy the use of our senses; it's an integral part of our humanity. After the fall, however, those senses became frequent obstacles to reaching out to God. Although our senses inform us, and relay truth to us, they also can have the tendency to draw us more to creation than they do to the Creator. So here we are now, on our sojourn in this life; born into a sort of exile, instinctively knowing that our true home is with God; and yet with this assortment of obstacles blocking our way, forcing us to work at our spirituality as though scaling mountains. God is reachable still, but it takes effort to get over those hills.

The readings of this second Sunday of Advent are of John the Baptist; John, who went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, quoting Isaiah prophet as he went: *prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads will be made smooth.* The roads which had been winding and rough, would become smooth and straight; because once those mountains and hills are made level, and the valleys filled in, the journey is no longer strenuous; long perhaps, but not as long, no longer as demanding as it had been. Christ comes to level that first huge range of mountains: the enjoyments of this world, the same ones which had become allurements for man. Christ shows us not to disdain the enjoyments, but to order them properly; he teaches his followers that we must be the masters of them, rather than they the masters of us. Christian love—the love which empties itself of self-concern, and instead seeks what is good, what is best, for all—instructs us on how to live. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” An affection

not of desire, but of the good for each one of those residents of Philippi, a desire for each of them to know Jesus and to have him in their lives. The next range of mountains which Christ will level: the enemy, the tempter. Although the devil will not give up, he has already lost, he's already been conquered; he was conquered the moment when Jesus rose from the dead, in the resurrection to new life, the life which we laid claim to in baptism. And the next range of mountains, the senses, these would be transformed as well. Jesus leveled this mountain when he gave us the sacraments, all of which by design are perceptible to the senses. The senses, which can be used to take in pleasures both legitimate and illegitimate, would be used to both impart sacramental grace, and to receive sacramental grace. And those sacramental graces, more than any other gift, will make the path to God straight, and smooth; there is no easier, more effective, more efficient way for man to reach God.

In the Gospel passage from Luke, before hearing about John the Baptist we are given a list of rulers: Pontius Pilate, Herod the Tetrarch, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas; not a friend to found in the bunch. Those rulers had within their power the ability to do much to change the world for good or for bad; they could have embraced the Messiah's coming, sought salvation for not only themselves but also for the people whom they ruled. The rulers of the day could have expiated the Israelite's return from exile, and could have expiated man's exile from God; but in Jesus' day, they did not. The secular world and its rulers didn't bring the Israelites back: God did. The secular world didn't welcome the Savior or his forerunner John the Baptist; that honor was given to the lowly and the outcast, such as the shepherds; the ones whom those in power looked down on and considered beneath themselves. As Christians, we are wise to use the secular world, but not to be led by the secular forces in society; to be in the world, but not of the world. What do the secular forces try to tell us about the Holy Day of Christmas, what they think it should really be about: partying, spending, eating, more spending. Even to say that the day is all about family, or all about the children, misses the day's true point and purpose. The Church did not give us Christmas so that we could have gift exchanges and big family dinners; the Church began this feast day, and did so because the profound truth, the profound saving truth that God became incarnate and lived among us, merits special celebration. And if we miss Advent—the time of preparation—we may miss our best opportunity to level some of those obstacles that could prevent us from reaching the fullest, truest, understanding of our Lord's nativity.

Flying over mountains, it looks like it should be pretty easy to climb them; getting down to earth gives a much more realistic perception of both the obstacles, and our abilities. And certainly, we can climb those mountains, and wind our way around them, or drill through the middle of them, and eventually reach our goal. But God has made the path smooth and straight; reaching him need no longer be the struggle it has been before. The observance of Advent and a true celebration of Christmas—which begins, not ends, on December 25th—is an effective way for us to get onto that straight path. If the path to God does not seem straight, it means that we got off the path somehow. Get back on the straight path through the leveled hills and valleys, and hurry towards our God, whose coming as man and whose coming in time are certainly hurrying towards us.

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