

“Turn Around!  
Don’t Be Distracted  
From the Hope  
That Is Yours”

John L. Heins  
Cross & Crown  
December 4, 2011  
2nd Sun. in Advent  
Isaiah 40:1-11  
Ps. 85:1-2,8-13  
2 Peter 3:8-15a  
Mark 1:1-8

I hope you are enjoying this Advent season of preparation for Christmas. We’ll be setting up a tree and decorating the church building later today. I rejoice that some of you have decorated your tree, made plans for various kinds of celebrations, and have given yourself the opportunity for spiritual preparation by coming to worship today.

One of the things I do enjoy this season are opportunities for the cards that are shared, the songs we sing, and the special movies and plays that depict the spirit of Christ’s love. We’ll have an opportunity to sense that spirit in the dinner theater here tonight.

Connie and I had the privilege this past week of seeing the near classic musical theater called “Annie.” Little orphan Annie charms the audience with her graciousness, friendliness, caring, and optimism. She brings tears to many as she sings: “The sun will come out tomorrow – bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow – come what may – Tomorrow, Tomorrow, I love you, Tomorrow, you’re only

a day away.” This play is full of hope. And the hope becomes more than temporary optimism. It becomes faith. For me, the play touched my faith cords: Yes, God’s sun will come out tomorrow because our loving God has sent his special son, Jesus into this world to bring us the light of all we really need to make our lives full and joy-filled and at peace.

Today we are in the Advent season of the church. Royal blue is the color of our paraments. It is a color of hope; it is looking up to the sky and seeing things greater than us – and yet things that we can taste in our life experiences. To enter into this spirit of hope is to be somewhat meditative. We ponder on the blessings of our life; we seek God in the still small voice of our hearts. We ponder the mystery and awesomeness of God touching human beings – not only through Jesus – but through God’s Holy Spirit that surrounds us and wishes to nest in our very soul.

Hopefully you will allow yourself to have these meditative moments of hope in the music you hear, in the quiet times you allow, in the activities that touch the spirit of Christmas within us.

Our Gospel lesson today is about a new beginning – New beginnings are based upon hope. When you start a new job, enter a

new school, begin a new project, you are filled with the hope that you are on a new path in your life that will bring its own rewards.

Mark begins his story of Jesus with the words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This gospel writer is filled with hope, himself. He is beginning to tell us the story of Jesus and all the good news Jesus brings. Mark begins by introducing a holy man, John the Baptist, who is even more excited about what God is doing in this world. John introduces us to Jesus as the source of power and life. He calls us to be prepared with the imagery of a highway across the desert wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” This is reminiscent of Isaiah’s words: Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low and uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. It’s like a gigantic highway construction project. Nowadays, we hop in the car and take off. Struts, shock absorbers, front-wheel drives, a good set of tires -- and even the roughest spots on the interstate -- make our travels easy. Back in Jesus’ day, a cart or donkey -- or more likely our own feet would be our only mode of transportation. We would go on paths that went up and down hills, through streams, bouncing off rocks and holes, twisting and turning;

we would be lucky to go ten to twenty miles in a day at the most. It is this imagery that is the background of John's cry to make paths straight – not so we can travel better, but so we can welcome God directly into our hearts and into the actions of our bodies – that God can enter straight in!

John the Baptist offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as key to preparing the road to our hearts. John was aware that we do not always travel the path of God's way. Sometimes we take ourselves down dead end roads. We humans are easily distracted from what is really important. Our curiosity can be a good thing to help us explore healthy roads, but some roads are clearly filled with land-mines. When we travel the roads of selfishness and loving money more than God, or the road of consumerism and greed, we discover eventually we have been on a dead-end road of life. These roads require us to make a U-turn. We have to turn our commitments around and dedicate ourselves to a road that God invites us to take. That's what John's baptism of repentance is about. To repent means to make a spiritual turn-around that also turns our bodies and hearts onto a path toward the ways of God.

Perhaps one of the dead-end roads of this season is an over-dedication to looking more to what we can get rather than to what we can offer. It's like Linus writing a letter to Santa Claus in the *Peanuts* cartoon strip. Linus writes: "Dear Santa, Please don't bother to come to my house this year. I realize that there are many children who will not have a Christmas at all. Go to someone more needy."

Lucy walks by and happens to read the letter. In shock and exasperation she says, "What kind of letter is that?"

Linus responds, "I'm hoping [Santa will] find my attitude particularly refreshing." ("Guilt-Free Praying," by Robert Jeffress, MOODY, September 1995, p. 29.)

Well, I suspect Santa did find Linus' attitude refreshing. I think God will find that attitude refreshing also. That is an attitude of repentance – a turning from a dead-end road to the path of life that God offers.

For John the Baptist, travelling Christ's road is riding along with the power of God by your side. This is different from the usual thoughts we think of as powerful. It's not about those who possess great wealth; it's not about political power or military control. It's not even about having the most toys. These are all false gods – all dead-

end roads. However, the real power is found in letting your spirit be engulfed by the Holy Spirit. That is why John concludes today's reading with the word: "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." To be baptized by the Holy Spirit is not a one-time act. To be baptized by the Holy Spirit is to wake up each day and the first thing you do is acknowledge that God is there with you. You start the day saying "God, thank you for this new day and the hope you provide. Come Holy Spirit and bathe my spirit; baptize me again this day and every day."

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ starts with a promise of hope; it bases that hope on our paying attention to what is really important in life. The Good News is that God will help us avoid the distractions that give us false hopes. The good news is that as we focus on God, the road to our heart will be made a clear pathway for the Spirit of the living God to reside within us. We will turn away from the glitter of consumerism, the false comfort of additions, the distractions that keep us from caring about others.

And so we come to worship God this day to keep tuned in to the hope for the world – the living Spirit of Christ. God's sun will come out tomorrow. God's light shines bright. As we turn toward that

light, God's Spirit surrounds us with the power of spiritual strength, the joy God wants for us, and the Peace of heart that allows God to feed us with living waters, the bread from heaven and the food that nourishes.

LET US PRAY: Lord, come, bring your spirit. Connect us with you hope and your peace and your joy. Amen.