

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 2nd Sunday of Advent

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Transfiguration Parish

December 10, 2017

Good morning! I'm delighted to return to Transfiguration Catholic Community to celebrate a Sunday Mass, especially in this beautiful season of Advent, when we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ at Christmas and at the end of time.

Before reflecting with you on today's Scriptures, I would like to take a moment to thank all of you for your being a light brightly visible in this part of Baltimore City. By your zeal for the Word of God, by your vibrant and heartfelt worship, and by the missionary and charitable outreach of this parish, you show the possibility of a way of life that is transfigured by the goodness and beauty of Jesus – and for that I sincerely thank you. This community of faith will continue to play an essential role in the evangelization of the City of Baltimore and I look forward to the work we will do together now and in the years ahead.

Animating, coordinating, unifying, and leading this parish is none other than your devoted and hard-working Pastor, Fr. Augustine. Please join me in expressing our common thanks to Fr. Augustine! Let me also take this moment to thank Fr. Edmond who has served as Chaplain at the University of Maryland Medical Center and now will return to his native Nigeria to work in the Apostolic Nunciature there. Thank you for your ministry among us – we will truly miss you!

Let us turn, then, to the Scriptures for this Second Sunday of Advent – readings that lead us not to an oasis or a resort but to the desert. In the first reading, the Prophet Isaiah tells of a voice crying out in the desert: "...prepare the way for our God!" In the Gospel, we meet that voice crying out in the desert, John the Baptist, who proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John announced the coming of Christ in a barren and desolate place.

We meet the forerunner of Christ in the desert. We await the coming of Christ in the desert.

And we may say to ourselves, "But we're not living in a desert." Here we have plenty rain, even snow, and grass will grow anywhere, even between the cracks in the sidewalk and anywhere there's vacant land. It is true - John proclaimed the coming of Christ in an actual desert but today you and I are challenged to hear his words in another kind of desert - in the desert of a City made desolate by poverty, violence, drugs, guns, and gangs, a City made desolate by the very real sin of racism. To be sure there are many signs of new life in the City and many people of good will, including residents, are doing much good. If you have ever joined Bishop Madden on one of his prayer walks to visit and pray at the sites where people were gunned down, often young people and innocent victims, you sense desolation and misery coupled with hope and determination.

Friends, this is where we must welcome the voice of John the Baptist. And while we must take every necessary step to curb violence, to build trust, and to address deep and systemic problems, let us also heed the voice of the Baptist who is telling us that none of this will happen unless and until there is a change of heart in ourselves and in a critical mass of people who call this City home. So long as human hearts are unmoved by the voice of John the Baptist calling us to make the inroads of our hearts a highway for the Lord, so long as human hearts remain unmoved by the love of God who sent his only Son to redeem us of our sins - the City will remain desolate and no amount of money no amount of social programs will change the situation very much.

What a burden this places on our shoulders as believers, as followers of Christ and as members of Christ's Body, the Church! Even as we seek to serve the needs we see all around us and seek to affirm the dignity of each human life, we also hear John the Baptist calling us anew to repentance and newness of life. So if we would be agents of change, agents of kindness & truth, justice & peace, then in this Advent Season we need to look first into our own hearts for our hearts are the highways and byways through which Christ will reach those in our City who are in great need and those who are disconnected from Christ and from the Church. Yet, if we are honest, do we not find that there are indeed obstacles in our hearts to the peace of Christ? Are there not hidden rooms in the depth of our heart where we harbor anger, grudges,

self-centeredness in all its forms, indifference to the poor... and many other vices that obscure the presence of Christ among us? Advent is the perfect time to come to terms with all these things.

Indeed, in today's second reading, St. Peter encourages us to take just such steps in our lives. Looking ahead in to the second coming of Christ at the end of time, he challenges us: "[Consider] what sort of persons you ought to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion... And again... "[B]e eager to be found without spot or blemish before Him, at peace!" So too, St. John the Baptist calls us to a baptism of repentance to a genuine change of heart, the same change of heart we hope to see all around us in all the places where we live and work and raise our children.

However, when we hear St. John the Baptist calling us to a baptism of repentance, we will remember that we have already been baptized, and indeed we have been baptized by water and the Holy Spirit – the fire of the Holy Spirit that consumes everything unworthy of true discipleship. Even so, how easy it is to allow the fire of the Spirit in us to grow cold, how easy it is to take our baptism in the Lord for granted. That is why the Lord gave his Church the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so that you and I could humbly acknowledge our sins and be forgiven. May I urge you to make a good unburdening confession of your sins during this Holy Season of Advent so that your hearts will be a highway for the Lord, so that the peace of Christ will dwell in you and through you reach others?

As the peace of Christ takes root in us we become beacons and messengers of hope. So often Baltimore is thought of only as a place of violence and poverty. This is what we see on the news, in the newspapers, and on social media. How saddened we should be that the narrative about our City is so negative, a negativity that feeds on itself and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of addressing the problems and offering people hope, the problems keep getting bigger and bigger, deeper and deeper. *I stand before you this morning to say that this is not what the Lord wants!*

The Lord wants us his disciples not only to be good but also to connect with all the good that is around us – all the good that is being done by the Church in our neighborhoods, food pantries, job training, healthcare, schools, Head Start, Safe

Streets, family stabilization programs, and so much, much more – add to that which other faith communities and community organizations are doing – We need to connect with all those who are doing these good things in the conviction that *goodness is on the rise* in Baltimore and that the Lord is still reaching his people through our works of heart and hand, and that his goodness, his love, his truth, can and will prevail – if only we are not faint of heart, if only we go out to meet the Lord in the desert, if only we become each day agents of his kindness and truth, justice and peace.

Let me end where I began by thanking you for bearing witness to the whole neighborhood and beyond to the reality of God's love and to the possibility of our living lives transfigured – lives made whole and holy – by the Lord's redeeming love. I wish you a blessed Advent and a holy and happy Christmas and may God bless us always and keep us in his love!