

Msgr. Dennis Sheehan
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Second Sunday of Advent
Liturgical Year B

Dad was at the computer struggling to balance his checkbook. His four-year old daughter tugged at him persuadingly. "Dad can we play?" "I'm really busy here, dear," answered her father. "But wait about an hour." "Okay," the girl replied, "and when you're finished, I'm going to give you a big hug." Then the little girl turned and started to leave the room. Suddenly she turned, ran to her dad, and gave him a big, long hug. Surprised, Dad said, "Honey, I thought that hug came in an hour." "Daddy," she said, "I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to."

That's Advent. It comes along each year to remind us lovingly of what we can look forward to. Our messenger today is John the Baptist. He's admittedly not the kind of character you feel like getting a hug from. But he's worth paying attention to if we're looking forward to the gift God gives at Christmas.

I came across a writer recently who believes Americans are in danger of slipping from belief in freedom to belief in fate. We seem to be losing a sense that we can really make a difference. It's not just a New Age fascination with Mystical Rose the fortuneteller. It's deeper than people who live by horoscopes. But all of these, including lucky numbers, can be signs that I believe life is beyond our control. Fate is the reality. Some actually tell us we're totally pre-programmed by DNA, we're doomed from the outset by our genetic package. The gospel today, with John the Baptist yelling in the wilderness, flies right in the face of that message. We're not programmed by the stars or the cycles of the season. God is in our future, and that opens up horizons of freedom and possibility. Fate, luck, and DNA are not the last word.

If we're in danger of losing freedom to belief in fate, I think there's a second peril we face in Advent. There's a gospel from Madison Avenue that tell us we're saved by what we acquire. If we just get this or just give that, the deepest longings in our aching hearts will be satisfied. We all know it's not true. But sometimes we live in that direction.

Along comes Advent with Mark's gospel and John the Baptist. John says repentance is the key. "Repentance"? That's about Christmas? Indeed it is. The call to repentance says clearly that we can change. No DNA, no fate, no lucky number here. We enjoy a certain real gift of freedom. Mark's gospel and John the Baptist offer us a view of a world where change can happen. We're not doomed to repeat old patterns. We can actually become whole new people.

So pay attention to John. He meets us, the story says, in the wilderness. He's a wilderness guy, not a city boy. The wilderness is a scary place, but it's free of all that complicates life in a city or town. John invites us in our own time to come with him to the wilderness. We don't have to join him, share his diet, imitate his clothing. We become "wilderness people" when we use our freedom to live outside the myths of this society. We become wilderness people when we realize we're not doomed by fate. We become wilderness people when we see that salvation and life are not dependent on what we own, what we acquire.

Becoming wilderness people makes us a little odd. We get wild; we live in ways our neighbors in this culture think crazy. But we know, as John knew, the real secret of life. We know we're free. We know the toys don't matter. We know this world and our lives in it can change when we let God in.

Yes, pay attention to John the Baptist. He's really on to something. And pay attention as well to that word we don't like: "repentance". Try the Greek instead from the bible, not just to sound smart. The Greek we render as repentance has a whole other feeling: *metanoia*. It means changing your vision, seeing and reacting to life in whole new ways. Try it this Advent: *metanoia*. It's a wild word, one made for wilderness people.

I came across a poem that pretty much sums up this wild freedom John the Baptist calls us to today. The poet wrote this about *metanoia*:

*The heart's metanoia on the other hand, turns without regret, turns not so much away as toward,
as if, the slow pilgrim has been surprised to find that sin is not so bad as it is a waste of time.*

That's it in an Advent nutshell. Go out into the wilderness. We'll know we're there, we'll know we've become wilderness people, when we no longer see fate as controlling us. We'll know the wilderness because the things we acquire will mean so much less. The wilderness is where our heart run wild right toward the big hug God is waiting to give us. God, after all, give us Advent so we'll know what we have to look forward to.