

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent - C  
Baruch 5:1-9;  
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11;  
Luke 3:1-6  
Little Flower - 12/9/12

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel introduces the figure of John the Baptist. Since Jesus said that "*among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist*" [Mt. 11:11], it is good to review what we know about John the Baptist.

Since his mother Elizabeth was Mary's cousin, Jesus and John the Baptist were also cousins. According to the Gospels, John's birth was a miraculous birth. Throughout the Old Testament, there were many miraculous births, mostly to overage and sterile women. Each of them was seen as a sign of God's presence, power, and favor in our world. Each of those born miraculously had a special part to play in God's plan of salvation.

John the Baptist had a unique role in salvation history. He was the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first prophet of the New Testament. Therefore, he was the bridge between the two Testaments. More importantly, he was the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'*" Because he announced the impending arrival of the Lord, he is called the Precursor, which means "one who runs ahead of."

Today, however, I would like to focus on his mission. "*John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins....*"

Our Advent Penance Service will be tomorrow (Monday) evening at 7:00 p.m., and I really want to encourage you to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with us. Eight priests will be available for confessions. As is our tradition, Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Bernadette will join us as will our second graders who will be receiving their First Reconciliation.

In the early Church, the Sacrament of Reconciliation was often seen as a second Baptism. Just as the waters of baptism washed away original sin and sins committed before baptism, reconciliation washed away sins committed after baptism. However, in the early church people could only receive reconciliation once in their life, and, therefore, many people postponed it until they were almost on their death beds.

Although it is always difficult to acknowledge our sins and take responsibility for them, Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation not to be a burden but a gift. When we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we encounter the forgiving Christ through the priest. Jesus understood that when we keep our sins inside us, when we keep them hidden, when we hold on to our sins, they eat away at us. Confessing our sins allows us to get them outside of us and then to let go of them. Likewise, when we receive the sacrament, we hear the words of forgiveness. Therefore, in faith, we know that we are forgiven. As human beings, in all of our relationships, including our relationship with God, we have a need to ask for forgiveness and to be forgiven.

My brothers and sisters, each of our readings today offers an insight into the meaning of God's forgiveness. The book of Baruch was written during the Babylonian Exile. God promised to bring his people home. The sacrament of Reconciliation is a kind of coming home. Paul's prayed for the Philippians that their love might increase more and more. Growth in love is a lifelong process with many starts and stops moving forward. Finally, the Gospel quotes Isaiah. During this season, Jesus wants a straight highway into our hearts. Sin creates the valleys, mountains, hills, winding roads, and rough ways that hinder his coming. The Sacrament of Reconciliation creates a straight highway for Jesus into our hearts. On Christmas, we want to celebrate not only Jesus' birth two thousand years ago but his rebirth in our lives and hearts. Nothing will better prepare us to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas than to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation this Advent, especially if we have not celebrated the sacrament for many years.