

So we are at three weeks before Christmas. I am sure we are all looking forward to that day when we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, the beginning of the fulfillment of God's plan for our salvation from sin and death.

But before we can get to Christmas. We have to get past John the Baptist. He stands there blocking our way, telling us to repent, pointing fingers, and calling people snakes.

John is calling out the Sadducees and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, and it is easy for us to dismiss this. After all these were the enemies of Jesus. That's not us, John is talking about them, not us.

Well, maybe.

The Sadducees and Pharisees were the political and religious leaders of Israel. These were the people who by all appearances were very devout, moral, upstanding people. They were the most visible and active members of their parish. They knew what to do when they went to church. They knew what prayers to say. They trusted in their status as Children of Abraham. Culturally speaking, they were good Jews, from good Jewish families, following good Jewish customs.

But John the Baptist warned them that just being good cultural Jews was not enough. "God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones."

Their religion was all on the surface; it didn't touch their hearts. And we are constantly tempted to make the same mistake. We don't even

realize it is happening. We go to Mass, receive the sacraments, and go to Catholic schools. But are we becoming complacent because we look like model Catholics on the outside? Have we become only culturally Catholic?

Our faith is about much more than that. You know there are people that think Catholics are not Christians. We should remind them that Catholics were the first Christians, just by our actions. All of us are called to be active, energetic, followers of Christ. He wants to have a deep personal friendship with each one of us. God wants us to know Him and love Him deeply, passionately, by building up His Kingdom.

When we live our lives like the Pharisees and Sadducees, we may look nice but our actions bear no fruit and God will not judge by appearances. Today Christ is reminding us through His messenger to live our faith more deeply, through our hearts. Then our lives will be branches of the one true vine, “producing good fruit.”

And when we live our faith deeply God has countless blessings for us. Isaiah uses vivid language to describe the perfect justice, peace, and harmony of life in the Kingdom of God. The prophet describes the lamb entertaining the wolf, the lion eating hay and living with the cattle, the utter destruction of all that is wicked and ruthless. This is a description of the world as it will be when Christ’s redemption reaches its fulfillment.

But it is also a description of what happens in our souls when we live our faith deeply, from the heart and let Christ rule us. To live our faith

in a superficial way, without letting it reach our hearts is a form of sloth, one of the deadly sins. Sloth is a type of spiritual laziness, it is a kind of living death.

Bruno Bettelheim was a young man living in Germany just before the Nazis came to power. As the Nazi terror started to move through Germany it became clear that it would not be long before it would destroy Bettelheim and his Jewish family. In his book "The Informed Heart" Bruno describes how he and his friends pleaded with their elders to leave Germany, to run away before they were all destroyed. But the more they pleaded the more the older people resisted. "No, we can't leave our possessions," they said, "We can't leave our homes, we're settled here." This went on week after week until finally the young people left Germany and the Nazi terror came and swallowed up the Jewish people that stayed behind.

Sloth is when we know we are setting out on a dangerous or damaging course of action but we cannot summon the courage, the hope and the faith to do something different.

That is what John is doing, calling us to repent of our deadly ways, to change course, to not be discouraged, to have hope and live our faith deeply before it is too late.

When we live our faith deeply, when we let Christ into our hearts, His strength, peace, and wisdom become ours. And it becomes easier to deal with the wickedness and ruthlessness of the world. One way we can do this is by trusting in God, completely, totally giving ourselves over to

Him. When we have done this we will find that our anxiety has been replaced by calmness and hope.

Saint Paul told us; “Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

During this time of Advent, we turn our attention to God’s saving plan for us. And that should energize us with a sense of supernatural optimism in the face of a society that values Christianity less and less every year. This is what Saint Paul calls “hope.”

Hope is the opposite of discouragement and pessimism. Hope is the confidence that no matter how dark it may get in the middle of winter, no matter how many times our symbols and traditions are corrupted, the light of Christ will never be extinguished.

The devil hates hope. He would prefer us to be discouraged because that leads to cynicism and despair. He does his best to turn our attention to the darkness and shadows, to the problems and failures.

Discouragement is the most crippling of vices. If we give in to discouragement we find ourselves just going through the motions of our faith. Whatever true faith we had was gone and now we are just on automatic.

This year, perhaps more than most years, is hard on a great many people. Prices are high, commodities are getting scarce, and if we haven’t lost our homes it is only because we are struggling to hold on to

them. Even paying bills and keeping food on the table is a major hurdle for more and more people.

But it is important that we do not give in to discouragement, that we do not lose hope. One simple way we can do this is to stop complaining. It is part of our human nature to complain. We see it at every level. We complain about our lives, our relatives, the economy, and the administration. We even complain about the weather. But it accomplishes nothing and only serves to draw our attention to the darkness. It is a common habit, easy to fall into, but it pulls us away from Christ.

To be people of Christian hope we must turn our complaints into projects. We have to learn to see problems in terms of solutions.

All the world looks to us to see what it means to be Christian. What do they see? Do they see a people indistinguishable from everyone else, rushing around to prepare for the holidays, forgetting that what we are really preparing for is a Holy Day? Or do they see a people that are eternally hopeful and filled with the joy and light of Christ? That is how true Christians think and live.

So let us take a moment and consider the words of John the Baptist because there is no Jesus without John, there is no rejoicing without repentance. Take a moment and consider the true nature of this season of preparation, and ask ourselves what are we really preparing for?