

December 7, 2014 ~ 2nd Sunday Advent, Year B

A Straight Path

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Mark 1:1-8

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*In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!
Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! [Isaiah 40:3]*

Sister Dori Valin died this past April. Before she died, she pointed many people toward Jesus Christ.

In her twenties, Dorothy Valin of San Diego marries a ship captain. After twenty-six years of marriage, he chooses to leave her for a younger woman. Along the way, she develops a very successful real estate business. Then, about twenty-four years ago, her faith leads her to sell her real estate holdings and move across the border to Tijuana, where she's known as Sister Dori.

Tijuana is known as one of the six worst places in the world for human exploitation, but Sister Dori, open to God's grace in her life, overcomes whatever fear the rest of us might feel. She runs *La Casa Éxodo* (Spanish for, Exodus House), a home for abandoned and exploited children and women (including teenage prostitutes) – people made to feel like damaged goods – people long forgotten by others. Until her death in April, Sister Dori stood as John Baptist, pointing people to Jesus Christ and helping hundreds of children and women find homes, legitimate work, and new lives.

When people are brought low, life can seem hopeless. Sister Dori brought hope to such people in Tijuana for two and a half decades.¹

In today's first reading, war devastates the Hebrew people when the Babylonian Empire overruns their kingdom and carts them across the desert into exile in Babylon. Living far from their homeland, they fear God has abandoned them. They feel life is hopeless.

However, the prophet Isaiah speaks a word of comfort to the Hebrew people, announcing that they will go home, saying:

*In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!
Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!*

Although their lives have been brought low, God neither forgets nor abandons the Hebrew people. Teenagers, the same is true for you: whenever you feel your life is brought low, God neither forgets nor abandons you. Dorothy Valin's life is brought low when her husband walks out, but she hears the message of hope and then, as Sister Dori, brings that message of hope to the exploited children, teenagers, and women of Tijuana.

Today's Gospel proclamation reminds us that that message of hope and promise finds its fullest expression in the person of Jesus Christ. This time, John the Baptist is God's messenger announcing *a straight path* for the Lord.

We anticipate Christmas in another two and half weeks, but today the Gospel calls us to look beyond shepherds, angels, and a manger. John the Baptist stands wherever we find a desert in our lives, wherever we find people exploited by others, wherever we find ourselves held captive by bad habits, or haunted by a past experience, or brought down by selfishness and sin.

A way of understanding this is what I once read about circus elephants. Some clergy visit the Ringling Brothers Circus at its winter quarters in Florida. Passing by the elephant area, one of them notices that the ropes around the elephants' feet aren't tied to anything. This oversight is pointed out to the handler, who says, "Oh, don't worry. We never tie them up. We just tie a rope around their leg and drop it, and they think they are tied up."²

Just so, we can be so tied up by certain situations and habits that we're held captive by a sense of hopelessness. We think we're held back when we're only bound by an endless loop of faulty thinking. The Gospel reminds us that we need a Savior and that Jesus is that Savior.

John the Baptist announces to you and me today that life is never hopeless, that God never forgets or abandons us. John calls you and me to be decisive, to make a choice, to make ready a *straight path* for Jesus to make a clear difference in your life and in mine.

I like the words of Pope Francis that I quoted last week:

Today Christ is knocking at the door of your heart.

Teenagers, another thought for you: I invite you to use this season of Advent to allow prayer to open that door. Some folks say that your prayer allows you to grow your relationship with Jesus, but I disagree with that. It's not that prayer grows your relationship with Jesus; instead, prayer *is* your relationship with Jesus.

As Americans, we easily give in to a consumerist attitude, and that consumerist attitude can even influence how we pray. To that point, one of my brother priests, Father Bob Leger (the pastor at Resurrection Church in Sunnyvale), recently shared a memory from a Peter, Paul, and Mary concert he was at long ago.

Over the years, Paul Stookey comes to take his Christian faith seriously. At one point during the concert, Paul's alone on stage. When introducing a song, he says he went through three stages of prayer. At first, he would pray: "Lord, buy me that red wagon." Then, he would pray: "Get me out of this trouble, and I promise never to offend you again." Then, he learns to pray: "Thy will be done."

Today and every day, Christ is knocking at the door of your heart and my heart. In this sacred space and wherever we find a sacred space during the week, may our prayer and our lives make for a *straight path* for Jesus to enter our lives.

Jesus knocks, and we simply open our hearts to Jesus.

¹ adapted from Malcom Beith, *National Catholic Reporter*, "Finding Faith in Tijuana," 3/8/05, www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/globalpers/gp030805.htm, and from Espedel, Stanford, "Labor of Love," *San Diego NewsNotes*, September 2004, www.sdnewsnotes.com/ed/articles/2004/0409se.htm.

² downloaded from www.homiletics.com, 11/02/04.