

**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2019**  
**The Holy Eucharist**

**The Reverend Dr. Matthew Daniel Jacobson**

*Year A, Advent 2: Isaiah 11:1–10; Psalm 72:1–8; Romans 15:4–13; Matthew 3:1–12*

My niece Emily is eight years old and perhaps her greatest passion, at this point in her young life, is gymnastics. She's been at it for several years now and has been getting better and better, steadily progressing, day-by-day, week-by-week, as she puts more and more time in at the gym. And, then, this past spring she made it all the way to the States in New Jersey, competing against girls who, for the most part, were older than her. She was on this steady trajectory forward until she had a bit of a setback.

Toward the end of the summer, she, along with her two siblings, all came down with a viral infection of some sort. The other two were better within a couple days. But Emily started to get worse. Over the subsequent weeks, she started to get progressively weaker with painful sensations in her arms and legs, and at times even was a bit confused. She ultimately lost the ability to walk and was only crawling.

What happened to her is something not all that common, but also not all that uncommon either. It's known as Guillain-Barré syndrome. Essentially, her immune system was attacking her body's nerves in a reaction most likely triggered by that viral infection. Fortunately, with time, most people make a full recovery.

It all started around Labor Day and when I saw her recently over Thanksgiving, she was getting around fairly well, with the help of a cane. It's been a slow process and essentially she has had to relearn all the things that she used to know how to do (such as walking).

She now can do simple cartwheels, though only if she starts from a standing position. She hasn't been back on a balance beam and likely won't be for some time. In a sense, she finds herself in the middle of a process of relearning and re-becoming the gymnast that she already was.

Now, it may be a bit of a surprise that John the Baptist, that fiery preacher from down by the Jordan River, who we just encountered in our gospel lesson,

has made me think about my tiny eight-year-old niece. It's not just that Emily is tough, though she is.

John was pretty tough too. In the passage we heard, John the Baptist fires off several commands, verbs in the imperative form in the Greek, in part drawing upon Isaiah:<sup>1</sup> “*Prepare* the way of the Lord, *make* his paths straight.”<sup>2</sup>

The language conveys a sense of forward motion. Make those paths straight because Jesus is coming through. Full steam ahead!

But, there's one other verb from John in the imperative form: “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”<sup>3</sup>

The underlying Greek verb that we've translated as “repent,” carries with it a sense of changing one's mind, being converted, turning away from something and, well then, turning toward something else.<sup>4</sup> In

---

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 40:3.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3:3.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:2.

<sup>4</sup> μετανοέω; Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 640.

other words, turning back toward God, from whatever other path we had been heading down.

It is almost as though there is a bit of tension in the language between John's encouragement to move forward, but also, at the same time, to turn back. Though, there really is no tension if turning back is turning towards God -- since it's hard to argue that turning towards God isn't always the same thing as moving forward.

And, in Advent, we are called to do just that: to turn back to God. We do this in the present by looking to the past as well as to the future at the mysteries of God breaking into this world.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in a series of Advent sermons from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, puts it this way.<sup>5</sup> He describes not two, but rather the three advents, or three comings of our Lord, to focus on.

The first was two thousand years ago when Christ broke into this world. Though Jesus walked the earth in plain sight, for everyone to see, many rejected him.

---

<sup>5</sup> John Leinenweber, ed., *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons for Advent and the Christmas Season* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2007), 27-40.

Likewise, all will see him when he “come[s] again in glory to judge the living and dead.”<sup>6</sup>

But, what makes these sermons particularly interesting, and relevant to us right now in the present, is how Bernard also focuses on a third, an intermediate coming of the Lord. It’s one which is less obvious and isn’t always that easy to see.

He describes this intermediate coming as being “in spirit” and the “path by which we travel from the first to the final” comings of our Lord.<sup>7</sup> And, he describes it as “hidden,” because to see it, we need to see Christ in ourselves and, by doing so, Bernard tells us, we will heal our souls.<sup>8</sup>

Seeing Christ in ourselves of course relates to the teaching from Genesis that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”<sup>9</sup>

Working with such an understanding, the early Church united this central theme of creation with the writings

---

<sup>6</sup> The Nicene Creed as translated in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 359.

<sup>7</sup> Leinenweber, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons for Advent and the Christmas Season*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:27.

of St. Paul who describes Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” and that “in him,” that is in Christ, “all things in heaven and earth were created.”<sup>10</sup>

Early writers from the first few centuries of the Church, such as Irenaeus, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and others, refine the teaching from Genesis, in light of Paul, saying that humanity was created specifically in Christ’s image, with Christ as the perfect image of the Father.<sup>11</sup>

And so, as the twentieth century Greek theologian Panayiotis Nellas puts it, we as human beings can then be described as “the image of *the Image*.”<sup>12</sup>

It’s a bold statement to speak of ourselves as having been created as images of Christ. But, we also have to acknowledge that these are images that have tended to become a bit blurry.

As Bernard noted, it’s not all that easy to see Christ in ourselves. It’s why this intermediate advent of our Lord seems somewhat hidden relative to his first and

---

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 1:15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1987), 23-25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

last comings. But, Bernard also describes this middle advent as a path that we are traveling on. It's a path of living in Christ so that Jesus isn't quite so hidden inside us and becomes more and more visible. Less blurry.

It's in this sense that the message from John the Baptist, and really that of the Advent season more broadly, has made me think about my eight-year-old niece.

Emily is going through as process, albeit a primarily physical one, of relearning to become whom it is that she already was.

Likewise, the repentance that John the Baptist calls for, a moving forward by turning back to God, is part of our spiritual process of relearning to become whom it is that we already were, what we were created as, images of *the Image*: Jesus Christ.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.