

3rd Sunday Advent Year “B”

December 12-13, 2020

Smoothing Out the Rough Edges

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Perhaps when you were growing up you had a favorite toy, hobby or craft. Not being at all artistic, my interests often turned to the scientific. One Christmas gift ca. 1971-72 caught my fancy—it was a Skilcraft Rock Tumbler. When used properly over a period of time, transformed rough rocks into smooth and shiny stones. You could even make jewelry after the stones were polished, though this did not interest me in the least.

I just marveled at how clean and smooth they felt in my hands. The transformation was incredible. It actually changed rough stones into beautiful, high luster, semi-precious gemstones, such as amethyst, jasper, and agate. It worked by means six different grits and polishes that slowly broke down the rough rocks. I can still remember the sound of it turning over endlessly for hours. It fascinated me and probably annoyed everyone else at home. So, we relocated my gift to the bowels of the basement!

You could not recognize the rough, dirty grey stones a week later. This is because 30% of the rock or more was ground away with each rough grind. But you had to be patient and wait. In this day of Video games and electronics, I doubt this craft would be on anyone’s Christmas list today!

In today’s Gospel, John the Baptist makes his own the words of Isaiah the prophet—*‘make straight the way of the Lord.’* This happens in many ways.

In fact, my brief rock-polishing hobby actually taught me an awful lot about just what transformation entails, making straight what is crooked. What was ugly and dirty at first glance was able to be changed into something beautiful. Are willing to take the time? For the Christian willing to be transformed, the Lord will apply a process to us that is not dissimilar, including painstaking trials, with multiple layers peeled back, each one revealing something more about ourselves. And this is precisely where most stop the process.

Too many people fail to effect change, precisely because they hesitate to see what is revealed beneath the surface. We are very good at putting on the appearance of having it all together, but we lose out due to our stubbornness and fear. The transformation may happen here, as we pray, reflect, gaze towards the heavens, see the Gaudete Sunday flowers, etc.

But much of it takes place outside of Church, when we are brought low on account of our failings, made aware of our shortcomings. When we use our free will both to acknowledge and attack vice, weakness and character flaws, we are freed. When we stop making excuses, “Well, this is just the way I am,” and begin to see possibilities beyond them, we have opened ourselves to the transforming power of God’s love.

But the Word of God so transformed John that he went through the whole region of the Jordan preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He heard a Word that he could neither deny nor from which he could run. It grabbed hold of him and absolutely transformed him.

Why are we afraid to allow this to happen to us? I may not feel attracted to his severe life in the desert, for I am mostly comfortable here. Yet, without the long and laborious process of transformation, we must be willing to carrying this process through to the end. Our transformation will need to progress slowly but surely, with plenty of grit and polish.

God can take away our fear of facing ourselves, for we must first rest in knowing that we are loved unconditionally, just as we are, rough and raw at times, but also with the potential through grace to shine brilliantly before the Father.

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to St. John the Baptist, who himself, while hardly polished in appearance, speech or otherwise, radically allowed himself to be transformed by love, and breathed the fire of the Holy Spirit, sharing its power with whomever would listen.