

O God, be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

One of my favorite stories concerns a young man who walked into a card shop once looking to find just the right card for his girlfriend.

He asked the store clerk to help him pick out a card that would express his deepest most intimate feelings for the great love of his life.

After listening to the young man, the clerk handed him the store's best selling card.

It said on the front, "To the only girl I ever loved."

The young man nodded his head and smiled. He said, "This is perfect, just what I have been looking for, I'll take six".

Some people in our world find the concept of commitment a bit challenging.

This is one reason why the Second Sunday of Advent turns our attention to who I think are the world champions of commitment: the biblical prophets.

The Second Sunday prayer for Advent captures the notion of prophetic commitment well: *Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation; Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins.....*

Traditionally on this Sunday the gospel focuses on that great prophetic wild man of the New Testament, John the Baptist.

There are few people in Holy Scripture who seem more committed than John or someone who needs to be committed.

Whenever I close my eyes and think of a prophet this unsettling figure of a man on fire for God, clothed in camel skins (not a camel coat), eating locusts, and wild honey comes to mind.

And you should know that whenever I give a sermon at St. Martin's I can't help but see out of the corner of my eye, this figure of John in the front window, watching me, almost as if to say, you better get the message right, my friend, or else.....

Most of you are probably aware that the vocation of prophet in the Bible was not an easy job.

To be a Prophet for God was to renounce the all too human desire we have for popularity or personal comfort.

In most cases a prophet's fame came years after their deaths, when people finally realized they had been speaking God's truth.

One of the Old Testament's greatest prophets, Elijah lived most of his life on the run from an imperial edict of death.

Legend has it that Jeremiah was executed in Egypt by being sawed in half.

And of course, most of us remember that John the Baptist lost his head over Salome.

It is not difficult to figure out why the prophets were so unpopular.

They usually showed up without an invitation to the party and said things that people did not wish to hear.

They criticized folks for having the wrong religious commitments.

Jeremiah told people living in Jerusalem that God was going to take away the promised land of Israel and give it to the Babylonian invaders.

John the Baptist publicly accused the king, Herod Antipas, of being an adulterer for stealing his brother's wife.

What was he thinking?

The political establishment considered these men to be traitors for they always placed their allegiance to God above politics or popularity.

Prophets like John were single-minded in their commitment, unlike the young man in the card store; they had no trouble figuring out to whom their allegiance belonged.

On the Second Sunday of Advent, these prophets arrive and ask us to be accountable. They are looking over our shoulders asking difficult questions.

What do we love? What do we worship? What do we think is the most important thing in the world?

If we have the courage to be honest with these prophets of God, the season of Advent can be a great gift to us.

In the midst of a hectic and busy holiday season when our secular culture encourages us to seek happiness from material goods or possessions, we hear a different message in the prayers, scripture, and stories of Advent.

The church reminds us, with a little help from John that now is time for repentance, now is the time to turn away from lives of sin, to change the commitments we currently have for the ones that God desires for us.

I know it can be tempting to try and avoid figures like John the Baptist.

He is intrusive, frightening and a bit unsettling, but if we ignore the prophets and pass over our need for repentance the church becomes merely a purveyor of cheap grace.

One of my favorite theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer described these types of churches in the following way

It is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Jesus Christ, living and incarnate, Are you ready to meet him?

Are you ready like John to get committed to God?

These are the questions we should ask ourselves in the Advent season.

All too often, we are all been like that young man standing in that card shop....looking for that one card that will satisfy our longings for wholeness and happiness, and instead settling for lives of cheap grace...

We have all been guilty as well of buying too many cards. We have been pulled in too many directions without ever being really committed to Christ alone.

Are we ready in Advent to accept God's offer of "costly grace", to put away our old lives, and to start over, confident that God's love can show any prodigal the way back home.

Give us grace, heavenly Father to heed the prophet's warnings, and to forsake our sins for the new life that you offer us today.....

Amen