*“Can things get better before it gets any worse? We need someone who can step in and turn this thing around, before it’s too late.”* These are just some common questions we hear whenever an organization is heading in the wrong direction, whether it is a sport team that’s having consecutive losing seasons or a company or organization that are underperforming, failing to meet its expectations. We all want an instant quick-fix that would turn things around, unfortunately it doesn’t always work out that way, especially when the problem took years and years to developed due to lack of care, abuse, or abandonment. It is also easy for us to point our fingers at somebody else, let them take the blame and even getting rid of them, instead of examining our own actions and sharing the cause of our failures.

But that’s just a quick fix, putting on a band-aid to stop the internal bleeding that is taking place, is simply not enough. If we don’t examine our attitude and address the core of the problem, it will only exacerbate.

On this 2nd Sunday of Advent, all of us are invited to take a closer look at our own spiritual walk and identify areas in which we need to straighten out and begin the process of turning things around. Perhaps there are ways that are “crooked” and need to be straighten out.

This might be quite hard for some people…How many people would like to admit his or her own flaws and failures? But it is better that we discover this ourselves than to bear the consequences later on. We come to acknowledge that we are all human, we are not perfect, and we are all vulnerable to failures and failed expectations. It’s OK to claim our own failures. It’s the very 1st step in taking responsibility of improving ourselves, instead of blaming it on somebody else.

When I was in my undergrad study, I remember I had a midterm exam. I think it was the 3rd term of Physics. The exam was exceptionally challenging and we just hope that we would get as many partial credits as we can get. At least to demonstrate that we have the right approach in solving the problem. When the result of the midterm came back, I got a score of 16…16 out of a 100. Yup, that’s right!!! It was one of those ridiculous exams that almost everyone did poorly on it. Thankfully it was graded on a curve. The median score of that test was like a 20…so I was in the pack. Then again, there was a couple of kids who got like 40’s and 50’s. Those were the over-achievers who threw off the curves. But among the rest of us, it was a humbling experience of how we can better prepare ourselves for the remainder of the semester and for the final exam. To make the long story short, I did pass that course…and we moved on.

To admit our own failures and shortcomings can be quite a humbling and learning experience. By the same token, it is also humbling for us to forgive and to embrace others’ failures as well. **Forgiveness is meaningless if there is no repentance that resulting in change of actions.** This, however, does not grant us permission to sin at free will. That’s not how it works. What it does mean however, is that when we come before God in confession, it puts us in a humble and vulnerable posture that we admit we are not perfect and we all fall short of God’s plan and glory in our lives.

In our Gospel text that we read earlier, Luke connects us back to the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah more than 400 years before the coming of Christ. The people of Israel had distanced themselves from God due to their sinful disobedience. They had turned to other gods or other forms of godliness (or godlessness). They had abandoned the faith and their fidelity to the true God.

Despite the sinfulness of the people, Isaiah pleaded to God, on behalf of the people, for justice and redemption and for comfort, and peace. There were still some who have kept their hopes alive and yearned for the day of peace when a Savior would come to save them and to restore them out of their bondage. This is the same hope that we carry out during this season of Advent, as we wait for the coming of the Messiah King.

Through those darkened “silent” years, God was ready preparing the people’s hearts for the long expected Savior, just as they were during those 40 years wandering out in the wilderness. As the prophet Isaiah prophesied ***"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:***

***'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.***

***5Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."[[1]](#footnote-1)***

**What valleys in our lives must we filled today? What mountains and hills must be made low? What crookedness must be straightened? These are the questions that we must ask ourselves, before we move on, as we prepare our hearts during this Advent season.**

Crookedness implies that there is something that deviates from the standard…a benchmark that one must be measured up. It must be straightened. **The benchmark that we are being measured up to is our Savior Lord Jesus Christ, and our measuring stick is God’s Word and manifestation of God’s love by us through the lives of others.**

God will not only straighten the crookedness of our lives, but will deliver justice and re-establish peace upon those who are oppressed or being persecuted. God will turn things around, flip things upside down and inside out, starting from our hearts and expand upon how we see the world in relations to God’s kingdom and what is to come.

John’s message of repentance was a hard message to sell. It was hard back then, and it’s probably even harder for many of us today. Like everything else, there’s always two sides of the coins. John came to bear the bad news among the people but he also demonstrated how one could take action and turn it into something good…good not only for the people but good for the kingdom of God! John made it clear to the people that he was NOT the Savior whom they were longing for. He was NOT the Messiah. He was just the messenger…of the true Message that is to come! **Changes need to take place NOW, the crooked needs to be straighten, or else they may be too late.**

John was telling the people, including us today, that we must look ourselves in the mirror by examining ourselves, asking those tough questions that we may not feel comfortable answering, but this was all part of the process towards the ultimate reconciliation and redemption. John’s message was an alarming Wake-Up call for the people. It was the mid-term exam that we all failed and fell short of God’s expectations. Wake-up!!! Before it’s too late. By God’s grace, God still give us a second chance to redeem ourselves in the Final exam at the end.

Come to think of it, many of us today are also longing and yearning for our Savior to come. We have a tendency to skip through the process and looking too soon at the end. We can easily identify the many problems of our society, while hypocritically pointing fingers and casting blames on others while neglecting to look ourselves in the mirror. Let us not identify the speck in other’s eyes while we have a log in our own.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Through the eccentric prophet named John, who hung out in the wilderness, God offered this message of hope and peace while calling out for our own confession and repentance. Ultimately we must stand trail face-to-face and “straighten out the crooked” with God. No one is exempt! God is willing to reconcile with us through our repentance and the changing of our hearts. God’s promise remains steadfast through eternity and can withstand all trials. The minor prophet Malachi, as we read in our Old Testament text earlier, offered us a glimpse of what this process of redemption might look like using the metaphor of a refiner and purifier of gold and silver. Malachi, whose name literally means “my messenger”, surely was sent by God to send a message to the people. Malachi warned the people of their hypocritical worship, where the heart is not in the voice, nor the will in the action.[[3]](#footnote-3)  God became secondary in people’s lives and motives. Despite the repeated warnings by the prophet, the people persisted in their sins.

Only those who are pure in heart and reject any form of impurities may withstand the refiner’s fire. Those who remain crooked and refuse to bend will be left out and thrown into the eternal fire. Interestingly in verse 3, Malachi mentioned that the purification would be extended to ALL, even including those who are the descendants of Levi (the priestly tribe) and others who may claim to be self-righteous. No one is exempt.

The refiner will ultimately come to separate the wheat from the chaff. ***"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,"*** says the LORD Almighty. ***"Not a root or a branch will be left to them.[[4]](#footnote-4)***

This prophecy by Malachi was not meant to scare people but as a spiritual “Wake up” call… so that they may be prepared when the time does come! It is fitting that this minor prophet Malachi served an important bridge between the Testaments of the Old and the New covenant between God and his people.

**Malachi’s message was simple and to the point. All hope is not lost. Forgiveness and redemption, in the form of grace is available through one’s genuine confession and repentance.** We shall not, however, be complacent with God’s mercy. The window is closing in, even though we may not know the exact time or the exact hour of God’s judgement, we better not take any chances.

As agents of God’s peace in this world, we share God’s healing and promise through the love that we share with others. We have an obligation and a commission to “go prepare his ways for the kingdom to come. *To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. God will guide our feet into the way of peace, among God’s people.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Throughout this whole season of Advent, we pray that the everlasting Prince of Peace shall come and re-establish His reign upon us once again. ***“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all of her sins.”[[6]](#footnote-6)***

May we be the agents of God’s hope in this world that may seem hopeless at times, to those who have lost loved ones due to systemic injustice in this world, those who are struggling financially to make ends meet, those who may be experiencing loneliness, depression or are spiritually lost, those whose family have been separated across borders, or refugees who are seeking asylum from persecution and a chance for a better life for their children and their children’s children. God’s hope remains steadfast to those whose faith remains loyal to him. *The grass may wither and the flower may fade, but the word of God and the hope of God will stand forever*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**May we be inspired and challenged once again by the “silent voices” that are crying out in the wilderness,** those who may seem odd like John but had something to say among us. **God has commissioned us to be better listeners and doers of God’s word among the prophetic voices in this world.**  And we do so through grace and humility as demonstrated by Christ. Let us be the point of lights that shine brightly in the world of darkness.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. Luke 3:4-6 (Isaiah 40:3-4) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 7:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gregory, Alan *Connections, Year C, Volume 1,* *p.19* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Malachi 4:1* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Luke 1:79* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Isaiah 40:1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Isaiah 40:8* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)