

At the beginning of the gospel of Mark is a straight line. Not a circle, but a straight path. Point A to point B. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." How different this is from the American arenas of the 1870s and 80s. Back then, the most popular of sports involved walking in circles on dirt tracks. Men and women raced around the clock for six days at a time, and the bleachers at these events were absolutely packed with spectators.

The sport was *pedestrianism*. Walking in circles, day after day after day. According to *The Washington Post*, these foot-races would last for 144 hours straight. Competitors would stop once in a while to take naps on cots, but, aside from an occasional break, they would push themselves to the edge of physical and mental collapse.

And the fans? They loved it! Watching people walk in circles was the best game in town. There were no radios, record players, televisions, or computers to provide distractions. Competitive pedestrians were the country's first celebrity athletes. Their pictures appeared on trading cards, and some received lucrative endorsement deals. Dan O'Leary, who won a race by walking 520 miles, was the spokesman for Dittman's salt. John Hughes was sponsored by the *National Police Gazette* and raced with the newspaper's logo across the front of his shirt.

Not a Nike swoosh, but a newspaper logo. Champion walkers were highly paid as well. Charles Rowell raced for six days in New York City and won more than \$18,000. That's a lot of cash, especially when you consider that it would be roughly \$425,000 in today's dollars. But by the end of the 1800s, pedestrianism was dead. Not because fans got bored with watching people walk in circles, but because of race fixing and tampering. One famous pedestrian was caught chewing a substance that gave him an unsportsmanlike advantage -- coca leaves.

Now, we might laugh at competitive pedestrians, but we have to admit that we often find ourselves walking in circles as well. - We keep eating the same kinds

of junk food and wonder why it's hard to lose weight. - We continue to move in the same social circles and are curious about why we don't meet any new people. - We keep picking on family members in exactly the same way, and then are surprised by a blow-up or a fight. - We keep doing our work assignments in a repetitive manner, and then lament that we never advance in our careers. - We worship with the same comfortable songs and prayers, and then complain that we don't feel inspired.

We are pedestrians! Moving in circles. In fact, one of the definitions of the word "pedestrian" is "lacking distinction, ordinary." That being said, you might say that the time has come for us to break out of our endless loops and do something truly distinctive and extraordinary: *Walk the straight path*. And in our Gospel lesson this morning Mark tells us that the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins with the appearance of John the Baptizer. He is the one who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Make his paths straight, says Isaiah. Take the twists, turns, and circles of life and stretch them out. Create a straight line to Jesus Christ – from point A to point JC. John does this by appearing in the wilderness and "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He challenges people to break out of their destructive cycle of sinfulness by changing their minds and walking in a new direction -- that's the core meaning of "repentance," from the Greek word *metanoia*. John invites people to turn around and to take a new path away from sin and toward Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, most people associate the word "repentance" with simply being sorry. Sure, that is a good place to start, but John isn't asking people to be sorry, rather he is challenging them to change their lives. John's baptism of

repentance is better translated as: A baptism "to show that they had turned from their sins and turned toward God. " A baptism "to show that they were changing their hearts as well as their lives." A baptism of life-change."

Because people were hungry for life-change, they flocked to see John. They desperately wanted to break out of their self-destructive cycles and move in a new direction, so "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

The people of Judea had a choice: They could keep moving in circles, or they could find a straight path. While the ordinary, pedestrian approach would be to keep walking in laps, large numbers decided to take an extraordinary step and go out to John, the one "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt about his waist." He promised to put them in touch with Jesus, the one he said "is more powerful than I," the one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

We should give the people back then some credit: They chose to break their sinful cycles and get on a straight path to Jesus. And we can make the same choice today. As we move another week deeper into the season of Advent, let's turn to God, begin to change our hearts and lives and experience a true life-change. Although our lives often feel like endless circles, we can replace our pedestrianism with a walk in the Jesus direction. Along this path, Jesus steers us and strengthens us.

First, Jesus *steers* us. He is ahead of us on the road, leading us in the right direction, toward a life of love, joy, peace, and simplicity. Yes, simplicity. Linda Douty, a retreat leader and spiritual director, says that "less is more" in the life of a Christian. Cluttered schedules and cluttered closets can lead to cluttered minds and cluttered spirits. "As we ascend the ladder of success," she observes, "the pursuit of a more luxurious lifestyle starts to drive all our decisions. This starts eating up our

time and money -- until what we're going to buy, and where we're going to go, become our primary focus. Before we know it, our lives are dedicated to the maintenance of all our STUFF."

You remember what Jesus said to the rich young man, don't you? "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." He was inviting the man into a life of love, joy, peace and simplicity. But the man wouldn't do it. He was shocked and went away grieving, feeling anything but joy and peace. He had a cluttered closet and a cluttered spirit.

Similarly, as we move through the Christmas shopping season, let's not let our overflowing shopping carts prevent us from seeing where Jesus is steering us. He wants us to focus on him, rather than our trying to have or maintain a luxurious lifestyle. As country singer George Strait noted, *You don't bring nothing with you here And you can't take nothing back I ain't never seen a hearse, with a luggage rack.*

Sure, you might say the path Christ is calling us to follow is tough to walk, but fortunately Jesus also *strengthens* us. He baptizes us "with the Holy Spirit," filling us with his presence and power. The Spirit of Christ offers us love, joy and peace, as well as other spiritual gifts: "patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." These gifts are the marks of a Christian life and are the clearest signs that a person is moving along the path of Jesus.

Perhaps we need to look at the Advent/Christmas season as a time to begin to hear the good news again for the first time. While we probably don't have the same misconceptions about "Christ, the Messiah" or "the Son of God" as the ancient Greeks and Hebrews did, our understandings of "victory" "success" and of Jesus and what following him means probably needs some redefining, just as it did

for those first readers of Mark. The **way** that is being prepared is a way that will lead to suffering and death on the cross.

When the people of Galilee were threatened by false prophets, Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." He was aware that some people can talk a good game and make a positive impression, but they lack the inner health and integrity to produce anything worthwhile -- they're examples of how "the bad tree bears bad fruit."

We all know that bad fruit comes from lying and stealing, cutting corners and cheating. We see it all around us and maybe within us as well. Bad fruit destroyed the sport of pedestrianism after competitors got mixed up in race fixing and tampering. The sport of walking in circles became a race for the biggest payout, and quickly the entire enterprise collapsed.

The same can happen to us, if we don't repent, turn toward God, make a life-change and get on the right track. Fortunately, the straight path is available to us, with Jesus steering us and strengthening us. If we walk the line with Jesus, we'll be able to produce the kinds of fruit that will be good for us and for everyone around us. So, let's get out of our endless loops and walk in a new direction -- point A to point JC. And may our Advent path lead us straight to the Savior in the Manger. Thanks be to God. Amen.