

We use the word “straight” in many ways: set the record straight, get this straight, look me straight in the eye. In each instance what is at stake is right relationship. John the Baptist is direct and emphatic in calling us to straighten our way to right relationship with God and one another.

For John, straightening the way of the Lord is clear and simple: Repent! Repentance comes from a single-minded focus on how the Word dwells among us and forms us. God himself leads us along the straight ways.

What does repentance, “straightening” look like? A true story made into a movie twenty some years ago illustrates the call of today’s Advent scriptures.

Alvin Straight (yes that was his name) lived in Laurens, Iowa. At some point in their adult relationship Alvin and his brother Lyle, to quote Alvin, “had words with each other”. From that day they had not spoken to each other nor had any physical contact. Lyle moved out of state to near Boscobel, Wisconsin. Alvin, now an old man in declining health living and being cared for by his daughter Rose, receives a phone call one day informing him that Lyle has had a severe stroke. Time is running short for both brothers. Faced with this prospect Alvin embarks on a journey to visit his brother. Given his overall poor health, Alvin no longer has a driver’s license. Yet he must make this journey. He embarks on a bold plan. He rigs up a trailer and attaches it to his riding lawn tractor setting out on what turns out to be a six-week journey basically following U.S. Highway 18 across northwestern, north central and northeast Iowa, crossing the Mississippi River at Marquette and continuing on to Boscobel. Along his journey (in the movie) Alvin encounters other individuals who also have some “straightening out” to do in their relationships: a young pregnant teenager running away from her home because “her parents don’t understand”: a fellow World War II veteran needing to come to terms with the deaths he inflicted in the heat of battle: twin brothers called to repair Alvin’s lawn tractor after it breaks down who own an implement repair business who could be the offspring of the “Bickersons” for their constant sniping at each other. And all this time at home, Alvin’s daughter Rose stares blankly out of the window of her father’s

house pondering the cruelty of fate as she pines for her four children who were removed from her custody by the state Department of Social Services after a fire at her home over which she had no control. A social worker assumed her slight speech impediment, which caused her to form her words slowly and deliberately, was a sign of mental incompetency at some level deemed her to be an “unfit” mother. As each shares their story Alvin with folksy wisdom, helps each to come to reconciliation with their past and present reality and find peace. Each has become part of Alvin’s own journey to “straighten out” his life.

Finally Alvin, after nearly not completing his journey due to his lawn tractor again “giving up the ghost” but miraculously revived, arrives at Lyle’s run-down cabin in the woods. Getting off the tractor and haltingly walking with the aid of two canes Alvin shouts, “Lyle! Lyle Straight! It’s Alvin!” For several awkward seconds silence reigns. Has Alvin arrived too late? Has Lyle heard, but chosen to hold tight his grudge? Finally, the door opens and Lyle, bent and shuffling with the aid of a walker, emerges. Alvin ascends the steps. The brothers meet. They stare straight into each other’s face. Tears well up in both sets of eyes. The animosity of years melts away. Alvin and Lyle have been reconciled. Both have been “straightened.”

What in each of our lives need “straightening”?—in my relationship to God, a family member, a co-worker, a fellow parishioner—whomever. The prophet Baruch and Saint Paul proclaim the good news that God’s plan for us is healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, joy and renewed relationship with him and each other. It is said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. I re-echo last weekend’s invitation to all of us to begin our own “straight” journey by taking that first step and approach the Lord who is waiting to offer us his gifts of healing, forgiveness and wholeness in the confessional in celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Like Alvin, open your heart to the grace of God inviting you to renewed relationship with him and with each other.

Make straight the way of the Lord.