

On Thursday, Nathan Finnin (our seminarian) and I were going to a lunch hosted by the divinity school he attends and the one from which I graduated. The lunch was in New York, so we agreed that he'd come to Christ & Holy Trinity, and together we would drive to the train station. Since parking -- for those of us without permits -- can be dicey at the Westport station, I suggested we drive directly to Stamford for guaranteed garage parking and pick up Metro North from there. That would have been a fine idea except that I left 95 at the wrong exit -- one exit too soon. We soon found ourselves in a warehouse district, trying to find our way. We could *see* the Metro North station from where we were, but we couldn't seem to *get* there. We followed what turned out to be a delivery road that dead-ended in a parking lot. We turned around, found the main road, and thought we would make our train. But then we came to a bright orange sign mounted on a construction saw horse. The sign read: DETOUR.

It was one of those days.

Maybe you've had a similar day this week -- especially if you're busy with activities above and beyond your normal schedule: buying a Christmas tree, writing cards, shopping, planning meals.

I don't know about you, but the more I have on my plate, the harder it is for me to think straight (as evidenced by my getting off at the wrong exit) and the harder it is for me to prioritize and determine *what is the most important thing I can be doing right now?* The busier I am, the less likely I will take time to answer that question, so I can find myself running in circles. It can be dizzying and definitely distracting.

Certain crises have a way of bringing clarity to what is important in life and what is not. If you've ever found yourself or a loved one in the hospital, then you know what I mean. Really wonderful events help us see through the clutter just as well: new babies born, reunions with loved ones, a clean bill of health. These events pierce our petty concerns, enabling us to hold fast to what is of ultimate significance.

Deadlines can bring a similar clarity, forcing us to quickly prioritize.

John the Baptist is a walking deadline, an agent of clarification. While our minds are going a mile a minute and our bodies scurrying here and there, his voice sounds, reminding us of this season's proper priorities:

Prepare the way of the Lord. God will be here before we know it.

Every year, about the 2nd week of December, we hear from John the Baptist. And every year, we hear him proclaim his baptism of repentance.

The word "repent" carries a lot of baggage: we associate it with fire and brimstone preaching and the guilt that goes along with that. Yet a more accurate translation of the Greek word for "repent" would be: "turn around; you're headed in the wrong direction."

I have never traveled to Greece, but I'm told by those who have that dead-end streets there are marked by signs that tell travelers to "repent" ("Metanoia" in Greek). *Turn around.*

I think about us and all the cares that demand our attention, that send us running -- often away from God. There are many dead-ends that beckon us -- overindulgence, stress, materialism, a focus on our own families to the exclusion of the needs of others. In the 2nd week of December, it takes the likes of John the Baptist -- a wild-eyed, wild-haired prophet -- to catch us in our scurrying and get us to stop and turn around. He proclaims a baptism of repentance and tells us to get ready. Get ready, not for the office party, or the Macy's Day Sales, but get ready for God who won't care if we're wearing the same sweater we wore last year.

We will miss God if we're moving fast in the wrong direction -- just like I missed that exit and just like most people living in Nazareth all those years ago missed the miracle in the stable.

Shopping has become the way many of us prepare for Christmas. John the Baptist invites us to a deeper kind of preparation. For those of us who've been scurrying and running in many directions, it is not too late to stop and turn around. We have two, full weeks of Advent remaining. Let us use them rightly so that we will *not* miss -- but see -- the Lord's arrival.