

2nd Sunday, Ordinary Time, 2023—

We tend to think of John the Baptist as The Voice—the one crying out in the wilderness—crying out in the desert. We come to see him as the forerunner of Jesus. He prepares Jesus' way. We recognize him as a prophet. Jesus even calls him one. And John prophesies for us in today's Gospel. He says: "Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." And then he adds: "I can testify...he is the Son of God."

Ultimately, John the Baptist is all of that.

But you know what? We can also think of him another way. We can come to know him as a figure of great hope for us. More than a wild and fiery figure, he is also—to my mind—the Saint of Second Chances.

He can wander into the wild and disordered parts of our lives, and he can invite us to start over there—to start over and over again—to always start over.

He did. I mean, look at his life. He really gets driven out of Jerusalem. The religious leaders there hate him.

The Roman authorities despise him. Many of the regular folks are confused and most likely scared by him, right?

But he starts over. He travels all the way from Jerusalem over to the Dead Sea area. And—in the Jordan River—he baptizes in water...for repentance—and NOT in the Spirit—that's Jesus' power—John baptizes whoever comes to him. And he prophesies about...Jesus—as he did for us today.

Appropriately, we are entering into a new liturgical season—Ordinary Time—where we will be reading the gospel of Matthew starting next week. That's the Gospel most scholars believe was the very second one ever written. And Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus—a list of many of Jesus' ancestors going back to Genesis. In other words, we start at..."The beginning."

And the message from the beginning? Everything is new. Every generation is a fresh start. And—along with that—every person of each generation is made new to make the world new—and totally new in God's Spirit with the arrival of Jesus—which is what John prophesies.

So, our Gospel holds so much promise for us today. With help from the Spirit—God's Spirit—we can be made new...begin again. Something has happened that has changed everything—Jesus' birth, and life, and death, and resurrection. So, we're being told to take our chances at a fresh start—to make things right with God—and with others.

The other day I read the story of Philip Kim, who was born in Korea, but became an American citizen.

His story began for me when Kim was a 16-year-old boy. During the Korean War back in the 1950s, he was one of many boys rounded up and arrested for refusing to join the People's Communist Army of North Korea. His captors took him to prison and were going to execute him. Philip Kim stood there, lined up with the other boys, facing a wall, and he closed his eyes, waiting for the gunshot that would end his life.

But at the last minute, an officer yelled for the executioners to stop.

The officer noticed that one of the other boys lined up against the wall was holding a rosary. The boy was praying the rosary. The execution was called off. All the boys were spared.

That moment changed everything for Kim. He wasn't a Christian. But he never forgot what happened—what had saved his life. Not long after, he converted to Catholic Christianity, and came to America. He married—he raised a family—and he became active in his local Catholic church.

Eventually, he settled in San Antonio, Texas, where he opened his home to other Korean immigrants to hold Catholic Masses. Those Masses led him to help found the first Korean Catholic church in San Antonio. His love for God, for the Catholic Church and for his parish led him eventually

to being ordained a deacon in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Several years later, his wife died after a long battle with breast cancer. Before she died, she gave Philip her blessing to become a priest. And he did.

He was ordained at the age of 72! He owed his remarkable spiritual and physical life to a second chance nearly 60 years ago. And he didn't let it get away. He made his life matter. So...what about the rest of us?

At this beginning of this season of Ordinary Time, John the Baptist calls out to us. He's imploring us: "You have another chance," he tells us. "And you can do your second chances with the Son of God as your accompanist. So, seize your chance. Then, prepare to use it...and Go...!"

To paraphrase Isaiah: "Level the mountains and fill in the valleys. Make what is crooked—straight."

Like that boy, Philip Kim, facing a wall, and facing death...we can start over.

So, think of those mountains and valleys, those winding roads that cut through every one of our lives. And think of the wild and untamed man in the desert, John the Baptist. He tells us: "It's not too late to change." And now, maybe we can say this: St. John the Baptist is not just the Saint of Second Chances.

He is also the saint of: "I'm sorry. Let's talk." He is the saint of: "Where did I go wrong?" And the saint of: "How can I make this right?"

He is the saint of: "I'm addicted, and I need help." He is the saint of: "Bless me, father, for I have sinned..." He is the saint of: "The slammed door being re-opened...the phone being picked up...the fences being mended...the wound being healed."

So, how about this? How about if we listen to this saint of many sides—but especially the side of his being the Saint of Second Chances—and try to take hold of every one of those chances that come our way. We can imagine St. John liking that. We can imagine the Son of God—our accompanist as prophesied by John—blessing that.

Please give it some thought. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!