

Advent is probably one of the busiest times of the year. Right now you are probably in the midst of going to/preparing for Christmas parties, engaging in parking wars at the mall, carrying hundreds of bags for food or presents—all of this is done on top of an already busy family life.

When I think of busy times like these, I wonder how my family survived through this time or just survived in general. I come from a large family. I have two brothers and two sisters. We are all essentially one year apart and so my mom had five kids in about 6 years. It probably felt like Advent all year round for six years!

What can happen in the busy-ness of family life during this preparation time for Christmas is that parents can lose sight of the most indispensable role that they have: **to prepare the way of the Lord for their children, to prepare the hearts of their children to receive the love of God into their hearts.**

What does it mean to prepare the way of the Lord as John the Baptist tells us? Our first reading will shed more light on this truth.

At a certain point in the history of Israel, the people were exiled out of their land to various places in the ancient world. And so in the scriptures Jerusalem is depicted as a mother who is weeping and mourning because her children have been separated from her, have been exiled out of her land.

Yet the story does not end there. We hear from the prophet Baruch who says to the weeping mother Jerusalem: ‘Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem...Stand upon the height and...see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One...for they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you...God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up to make level ground so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.’

So when John is saying, “prepare the way of the Lord!” He is not just saying that God is coming (although it is significant), but he is saying: prepare the way for God to lead the people of Israel, the children of Jerusalem, back to the promised land.

Ok great so what does this have to do with me and my family?

John the Baptist's message is for you: Prepare the way of the Lord, prepare the hearts of your children so that God can lead them, not the earthly Jerusalem but to the heavenly promised land.

See, at a time in our country and culture when the world seems to discount mothers and fathers, the Church pronounces again that you, parents, have an indispensable role in the lives of your children. Fathers and mothers, you have been given spiritual authority by almighty God himself because he has entrusted these children to you as their parents and to no one else. You are their parents.

The best way parents can prepare the way for the Lord in their children's heart is something that many of you already know but maybe we have not pondered the depths of this call: love your children.

One time when my nephew was young we got him a jolly jumper where it is a child's seat attached to the ceiling somehow and the child could jump up and down. One time I was at home and I had played around with my nephew for a bit and I needed to do some other things and so I thought, I'll throw him into the jolly jumper and he will amuse himself. I put him in and he would smile and laugh, but when I looked away he would cry. I would repeat this and notice that pattern over and over again.

Whether your child is shooting a basketball or jumping over a puddle or even at the moment of birth when they draw their first breath, they are all asking the same question: do you see me? Am I loved? Sometimes we can be tempted to substitute parenting for providing where we provide for the basic physical and intellectual needs, yet the hearts of children cry out for so much more: do you see me? Am I loved?

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. (St John Paul II)

Moms and dads, you have a special role in communicating love to your children. You become the first evangelizers, the first missionaries of God's love because your love is meant to be a window, an icon, a sign that points to the love of the Father.

The *role of parents in education* is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute (GE 29).

The lives of your children will not make sense if you do not educate them in love, life is senseless for them if love is not revealed to them, if they do not encounter it.

Mothers, you are important. Children grow in the secure, warm environment of the wombs of their mother and from the first moment they receive their physical health, nourishment and growth from her. Yet at the same time this growth is happening, mothers also form the hearts of their children. A mother's love and affection provides security and value to the heart. It gives the child the ability to give and receive love, to be able to mature in it.

When we do not receive this love from our mothers for whatever reason (perceived neglect, hardships, personal circumstances), we have a heart that can be severely hindered in its capacity to love. The heart becomes like a cup with holes in it and every time it receives love, it is not able to retain it; it feels like it is draining out of the heart. We do not consciously notice it when we are young but when we get older we get this sense of emptiness, this repressed pain, a sense of deep rejection. (Story about KBBQ)

Fathers are also important in the formation of the heart but in a different way. The father calls us from the safety of our mother's arms into the experience of the world, the face challenges and difficulties. He instills within us a healthy sense of confidence and independence. He affirms us in a way that only the father can, and this affirmation as Dr. Conrad Baars writes, is the way in which we receive the gift of ourselves from another. We do not know who we are initially or have confidence in who we are, yet the affirmation of the father gives us a sense of confidence that I am good, that I have what it takes and this gives me a healthy independence to venture into the world.

When we do not receive the affirmation of the father, we don't have this healthy confidence, this healthy independence and so we can feel like we are not enough, and we can turn to other things to give us a complete sense of validation, a complete sense of affirmation that we lacked from our fathers.

What happens then is that these wounds not only effect our relationship with others, but it effects our relationship with God because the way we perceive our earthly parents effects how we see our Heavenly Father. While we believe in our heads he is a good Father, in our hearts we may quietly think, he doesn't care, he doesn't love me. I'm of no value to him or anyone, I have to take care of myself and I don't truly trust him. These wounds become barriers to God: they become valleys that are too deep and mountains that are too high.

Yet the Father speaks again into our brokenness to remind us: for God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up to make level ground. John the Baptist reminds parents of their role for their children: prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight his paths. Love your children deeply. Spend individual time with each of them. Yes it takes a lot of time, but they are worth it. See them intimately because their heart cries out: do you see me? Am I loved as I am, apart from my marks, apart from my trophies, apart from what I do? Do you love me for me? What can begin to happen is that your love for them helps them to see the love of the heavenly Father who truly knows how to love them best and who can love them infinitely better than we can.

The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. (Mother Teresa)

This Advent I would invite parents to prepare the way of the Lord in the hearts of their children. This sounds like a daunting task, but God gives you a special grace as parents to carry out this task! Recommit yourselves to loving your children, not just providing for them but knowing them deeply, looking deep into their hearts on a consistent basis. In doing so you can be that reflection of the Father's love and point them to the source of all love because our God IS Love.