

Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Preparing the Way

December 10, 2017

Prepare the way, O Zion, your Christ is drawing near! Let every hill and valley a level way appear. Greet One who comes in glory, foretold in sacred story. O blest is Christ who came in God’s most holy name.

He brings God’s rule, O Zion; he comes from heaven above. His rule is peace and freedom, and justice, truth, and love. Lift high your praise resounding, for grace and joy abounding. O blest is Christ who came in God’s most holy name.

Fling wide your gates, O Zion; your Savior’s rule embrace, and tidings of salvation proclaim in every place. All lands will bow rejoicing, their adoration voicing. O blest is Christ who came in God’s most holy name.

These are the lyrics to one of our Advent hymns which we don’t sing too often but one that reminds me of the call this morning to ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, to make our paths straight, to repent and be forgiven, to prepare our hearts for the child who will be, ‘*God with us, Emmanuel.*’ Over the last few weeks we have been encouraged to wait and live in ways that reflect God’s love into the world and now the waiting is nearly over as we get ready, as we prepare, for the Christ Child.

Now it seems to me that during the months of November and December there is a lot of preparations that happen in our lives. We start by preparing for Thanksgiving, which for many folks is a time for large family gatherings, both at home and here at the church. Houses get cleaned, menus are made, dishes are polished and set out, napkins are pressed, and the tables get set. And before you can take a deep breath or a short nap in your recliner, Christmas is upon us. Trees are being decorated, gifts are being bought and wrapped, dinner is being planned. Will we have turkey, ham, or roast beef? who will sit next to whom? And do we just buy gifts for the children or for everyone?

So many preparations that occupy our time and spirits. I’m not saying they aren’t necessary because we know that they are, but is that how we should be preparing during this season of Advent? Oh, we spend enormous amounts of time and energy preparing for our families and friends to arrive at Christmas, don’t we? But do we ever consider, in light of all those preparations for guests, how you are preparing for the One, Holy Guest, who is to come? The one John speaks about, the one who is greater than he, who will bring you a holy gift? How are we preparing for that?

Well, John the Baptizer and Mark and Isaiah have a few suggestions for us. That all wilderness journeys, all journeys of the spirit, all journeys of the divine, begin with repentance, a change of direction, and forgiveness, and I think that may be just as true now as it was then. But also like the prophets of old, we too are heralds of good tidings, we too are those who cry out, that God is like a shepherd, that your penalty has been paid, that there is comfort here in the arms of God. This is the good news!

In Mark's gospel and the Isaiah reading, it is fairly clear that the beginning of the good news has begun long before this. That these words of "one who prepares the way" is one, who has called to the people before. And what should be apparent to us if we have been following not only the story of God's people through the Bible, but our own stories as well, is that God is always beginning again and again and again, because he loves us that much!

It also reminds me that God's love is never changing. That it is eternal and always seeking, always forgiving, always preparing the way, always present. But these stories also remind me that we too, seem to resist change, resist God's love and forgiveness. That we, like those lost in exile and the wilderness, seem to find ourselves right back where we started. It is the story which God's people repeat over and over again throughout the entire narrative of the Bible. They forget how blessed they are and forget that God is the center of their lives leading to a self-centeredness, an unevenness, that neglects and overlooks all but themselves. They are called back by the prophets and Jesus until they repent and begin again. Begin again, loving the least in the kingdom and serving others. It is also a call for the nation to repent and do what they know is right for all people. It is a call for justice and fairness. It means now what it meant then, that there is a call in the wilderness for justice, for food, for compassion, for restoration. And given our current social and political climate I think I hear John call us as well, don't you?

Author Katie Munnik shared these thoughts. She said, "In Mark's gospel this week, we have the image of the wonderfully strange John the Baptist, calling people out from the city to stand with him in the wilderness river. He is calling for confession, for repentance, and for roads to be made straight. He is calling for change. Change of heart, change of life. But there is humility in this calling, too. It isn't that change is the answer. Change only prepares the way. John recognizes that the water with which he baptizes is only the beginning. When the Christ comes, the baptism will be stronger, and the people will know the Holy Spirit in their very hearts. That will be, quite literally, the crux of the matter. But for now, John calls for repentance and when we repent, we rethink. We reorient ourselves. We regret. We turn away from what has been. And in turning away, we turn towards the light." We turn towards the light. I love that don't you?

Perhaps this is why repentance is so important. That we begin Advent, the New Year, with a change of heart, a contrite spirit, a new direction. To take a moment and stop and look at your life. To ask yourself again, 'Is the way I live my life, the way I treat others, the way I care for the world, the way I prioritize my wants and needs, my Christmas list, my spiritual life, my lifestyle, and many other aspects of living and serving, and ask yourself, "do these things reflect God's light in the world? How might I prepare my heart for the greatest gift of all?"

Sue Monk Kidd, in one of her books, recalls her youth and how she would prepare for Christmas. In early December, she would sit by the wooden nativity set clustered under their Christmas tree and think over the last year of her life. She would think deeply about Christmas and the coming of Jesus.

She remembers, one time, visiting a monastery. It was a couple of weeks before Christmas. As she passed a monk walking outside, she greeted him with, "Merry Christmas." The monk's response caught her off guard a bit. "May Christ be born in you," he replied.

His words seemed strange and peculiar at the time. What did he mean, "May Christ be born in you?" At the time she was unsure of what he meant, but now all these years later, sitting beside the Christmas tree, she felt the impact of his words. She discovered that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation. It is also a time of transformation. It is "discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart."

How might we prepare ourselves this advent season in such a way that "Christ might be born in you?" perhaps like all those who came to the river that day the spirit was already at work softening the soil of your heart and urging you to come and lay down your sins and burdens. Come to the water, this Jordan river, a river that everyone has to cross at some time, and be washed clean, be made whole, be restored, that the one who is to come, who is mightier than you, who will fill you with the Holy Spirit, might find a welcome place in your heart. Perhaps it is time for you to go into your own wilderness and seek the Holy there. To find a place of stillness in the turmoil of not only our lives but of the busyness of the season. Shall we together, help one another find some peace and stillness as we anticipate the Blessed Babe of Bethlehem?

I want to leave you with this beautiful poem by Ann Weems, that speaks to me of the journey I need to take right now, and I hope it speaks to you as well. It is called, **In Search of Our Kneeling Places**, and it goes like this.

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we experience our own advent in his.
When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars
not hearing angel voices.
We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.
In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.
Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas Star.
In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.
This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.

May God bless you as you make a way for him, as you make the rough places smooth, as you kneel at both the river or the manger. Thanks be to God. Amen.