

Prepare the way

December is a time of year when we spend much of our time preparing. As we look forward to Christmas day, there can be so many things for us to do in order to get ready. We have presents to buy, packages or Christmas cards to send in the mail. There are trees to decorate and goodies to bake. Some of us will have parties to attend or host, or travel plans to arrange, or we may be preparing our homes for guests to arrive. There are all sorts of things for us to do as we prepare for Christmas.

The Church season of Advent is also about preparing. During these few weeks, the church is called to prepare for and look forward to the coming of Jesus' birth at Christmas. Advent also reminds us to be awake and ready for when Christ will come again in glory.

The Old Testament reading from Isaiah has the theme of preparation. This section of the book of Isaiah, beginning at chapter 40, is often referred to as Second Isaiah. And chapters 1 through 39 are called First Isaiah. First Isaiah take place in the time leading up to and including the exile in Babylon. Bible scholars believe Second Isaiah was written many years after that. In Second Isaiah, the Jews have been in exile for years. It has been decades since the invading armies defeated the Jews, destroyed the temple, and took many of Israel away into captivity in Babylon.

Finally, after this long, long time of being far from home in a foreign land, the word of the Lord comes to the people of Israel, in the words we heard this morning. After the devastating defeat, and being taken from their homes, and spending decades in captivity, we have the wondrous declaration from God that the time of their exile is over. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says the Lord, for your time away from home

is ended, and you are being called to return.” You have served the penalty for your sins. You are forgiven and being given new hope. And so, even while they are still in a foreign land, God calls them to prepare. Prepare the way of the Lord, Isaiah tells them; make a highway for our God. God will be with them in work, with the hills and mountains being brought down, and the valleys filled in, and the rough places becoming plains, so that the people may return to their home. For the days are coming, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed. God will gather the people the way a shepherd gathers the lambs. God will carry them and lead them. This is the journey before you, the prophet announces. Prepare the way of the Lord.

The opening of Mark’s gospel has a similar theme of preparing for God’s coming. Mark opens with these words, “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The word translated in English as good news is where we get our word Gospel. Here is the good news, Mark writes, and his very next sentence is about preparing for that, using the same words used by the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.”

Throughout the scriptures, we find that preparing often begins in the wilderness. The wilderness is a bare, stripped-down place. It is where we can where we can pay attention to what matters, where we can hear what God is saying to us. Abraham and Sarah journeyed through the wilderness before they finally came to the land of promise. Generations later, when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God set them free to return to their homeland. But because of their sin, and their grumbling, and lack of faith, God required that they wander in the wilderness for 40 long years. In the wilderness Israel would learn to rely on the Lord, and trust in God, and be willing to be led by God. Only then would be ready. Later in their history, when Israel was carried off into exile because of their sin, they spent 70 dark years in the

wilderness of Babylon. From that wilderness they were finally able to hear the comforting words spoken by Isaiah; a message of forgiveness calling them home. Centuries later, at the time of John the Baptist, when Israel was in the wilderness of Roman occupation and oppression, the people of Israel went literally out into the wilderness to hear John's message of repentance and forgiveness, a message calling people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

There was once an old church at the edge of a small town that desperately needed painting on the outside. It looked shabby and rundown. The leaders of the church sought a number of bids from painters in the area. A painter named Jacob, submitted the lowest bid, by far, and the church leaders chose him. The way Jacob could bid so low and still make money is that he diluted the paint with chemicals and water to make it go further. Even though this was a church.

Jacob came and worked a few days painting the church and it looked great. Members from the church came by to see and they were quite pleased. When Jacob finished, and was loading all his equipment back into his truck, a storm suddenly moved in. The skies grew dark and began to rain. As the rain increased to a downpour, the new paint ran off the church building and it puddled all around the foundation. The church looked terrible.

Suddenly, flashes of lightning appeared, and thunder shook the ground. Then, a loud voice boomed from the heavens, saying, "Jacob, repaint! Repaint and thin no more!"

That was Jacob's wilderness time. So, back to John. All the gospels describe John the Baptist as a kind of wild man. Although his father was a priest in the temple, John lived out in the desert, the wilderness, away from everyone. He wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild

honey. There is a roughness and urgency about him. And he speaks directly. And this is what he said: To prepare the way of the Lord, you must repent, and experience God's forgiveness. When we look at the scriptures, it seems this is always the message given to God's people out in the wilderness. Repent, turn to God. John called people to recognize and admit where they needed to turn their lives around. He offered a baptism for repentance, as Mark describes it. In Hebrew, the root word for "repent" meant making a complete turning around, what we would call a 180-degree turn. The Greek word is the same; it is the word "metanoia," that we find in the New Testament, means the same thing: to turn around. This is setting our life in a new direction. It is turning so that our mind can be changed, our vision expanded, and our lives be made new. That is what repentance does.

John's message of repentance is one all of us need to hear. I have heard people in the church say that they don't like scriptures or church services that feel too penitential, that talk too much about sin and repentance. But the truth is, we *all* need to look at those places of our lives where we are not living the way God wants us to. All of us humans are imperfect. We have areas of our lives that have been harmful to ourselves, and to those around us, maybe to the earth we live on. So, we have confession almost every Sunday. In the words of our confession, we all have things done and left undone, and we know, deep down, we need to look face that. Places where we need to repaint and stop thinning. We don't do this to beat ourselves up; God doesn't want that. It is simply doing the hard work of being honest with ourselves, and with God. Repentance invites us to let go of some of our old ways and ask again for *God's* ways to come into our lives. Repentance asks us to be willing to turn our lives around, over and over again, and to receive again the good news of God's forgiveness.

In the season of Advent, we look forward to Christmas, and the story of the baby in the manger, and singing Christmas carols, and giving and receiving presents. But the message from scripture, and the church is clear on this: we first must encounter John the Baptist to better prepare for the coming of Christ. Today, if you find yourself in the wilderness, far from where you believe you are supposed to be, you may need to do some turning around. Repentance is an invitation to more life, a life that is closer to God. Comfort, comfort to my people, God says. Turn. Turn again. Come back home.

In Advent, we await the coming of Christ. Yet we know that Christ is already present. That is why we are told to be awake and ready, so that we can see and hear God's presence in any moment, even in the wilderness. Advent is the call to participate in what God is already doing. It is living in not only in expectation of what is to come, it is trying to live faithfully to *what is*, on the road we are already on. Our journey toward Christ is always our journey with Christ. In the words of our psalm this morning, "Truly, God's salvation is very near to those who fear him, that God's glory may dwell in our land." And in our lives. Amen.

Trace Browning

Advent 2B – 2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11 • Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 • 2 Peter 3:8-15a • Mark 1:1-8

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