12-5/6-20 Prepare the Way Rev. Amy Haines

Mark 1:1-8 In the Waiting Advent Series

How are you preparing for Christmas this year? Are you decorating to bring a little holiday cheer to your home? Are you sending out Christmas cards to friends and family you haven’t seen in a while? Are you joining with others to light your Advent wreath each Sunday evening?

Or are you struggling this year to get anything done that remotely resembles the holiday season?

Since my family stayed home for Thanksgiving this year, we were able to get a jump on our decorations. Yet I still need to figure out where all of my nativities are going. This year is strange not planning for a triple birthday party, but we are working on ways to celebrate each special day.

While we each prepare for Christmas in our own ways, how do we also prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas? We may light an Advent wreath or put up a Nativity scene, but how little time do we spend pondering what they symbolize? Are we able to pause and reflect on the great gift of God’s love or do we rush through the season forgetting whose birth we really celebrate?

While the world around us rushes headlong into Christmas celebrations, in the church we are in the midst of the season of Advent, four weeks leading up to Christmas that invites us to intentionally slow down and prepare ourselves for the arrival of Christ at Christmas.

Advent is a season of expectant waiting. We wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus, just as we wait for Christ’s second coming to earth. We expect to hear the good news of God, yet we are also called to prepare our hearts and minds to receive such good news in the form of Jesus.

Advent does not deny the reality of the world we live in, but clings to hope that God’s promises will be fulfilled. As today’s scripture detours us from the journey of Bethlehem to encounter the prophet John the Baptist in the desert wilderness, we are reminded that God’s good news comes to us not when we have life all together, but when we are still in the midst of brokenness and sin and struggle.

As Philip F. Reinders once declared:

“Advent is a season of expectant waiting, tapping into the sense we have that all is not well,

the longing for the world to be made right again. It’s a season for restless hearts and people weary of a broken world who want, with all our being, to know there’s more than this.”

--thepastorsworkshop.com:Advent

Does it seem like we’ve been living in Advent for months now?

We are not the first, nor will we be the last, to long for a better world, to yearn for restoration,

to desire a new beginning away from our sins and shortcomings.

Last week we heard from the prophet Isaiah speaking to the people of God in exile. After years of prophesying judgement, Isaiah was finally prophesying restoration. He was proclaiming comfort and hope, the faithfulness of God’s Word and a call to prepare the way for the Lord.

Isaiah called for the people of Israel to prepare their hearts and minds for the changes that were to come as slowly they returned from exile to rebuild Jerusalem and reclaim their identity as God’s people.

400 years later, John the Baptist was the prophetic voice in the wilderness crying out,

“Prepare the way for the Lord.” He called the people of God to a baptism of life-change

that leads to forgiveness of sins. He called the people of God to prepare for the coming

of God’s long-awaited Messiah.

John’s favorite method of preparation for Christ’s coming was a call to repentance. And repentance is more than simply saying, “I am sorry.” Repentance comes from the Greek work metanoia, which is a complete change of mind, heart and will, an inner transformation that is outwardly visible in what we do and why.

Think of Scrooge or the Grinch as examples of metanoia.

This repentance is a turning away from what we have done wrong and a turning toward another way of living. We turn from our sin to right living. We turn from our selfishness to obedience to God. We turn from following the world’s ways to following God’s ways.

This life-change, this metanoia, this turnaround is not often easy, but it is the way that God calls us to live.

Several years ago, one of my aunts, who have all been teachers, shared the story of a former student who was the class troublemaker, the one who was always getting in trouble for not doing his homework, not paying attention, and not acting appropriately towards the other students in the class.

This student constantly challenged his teachers, and many teachers gave up on him as a hopeless case. Yet years later, when my aunt happened to run into this student again, he had experienced a complete turnaround in his life, and was now a successful businessman and husband. When he was in his twenties someone had invited him to church, and that one invitation began his experience of metanoia, his turning back to God and his transformation in all areas of his life.

Today, John is calling us to repent and change our lives in order to prepare our hearts and minds for the Lord’s arrival. What sinful and selfish ways do we need to confess? What detours in our lives need to be straightened out to stay on the straight and narrow path of faith? In what ways do our beliefs and thoughts and actions need to change to align with God’s presence and promises in our lives?

John calls us all to prepare for God’s coming through Christ, and to do so now.

In a normal year, if you were to throw a holiday party, would you wait until the first guests arrive to begin to clean or begin to cook? That would be disrespectful to your guests. If you are to throw a party, you would prepare for the party.

Yet how many of us refuse to prepare for God’s coming, thinking we have all the time in the world to get our hearts right with God, to turn away from sin and turn toward God, to love God and love neighbor in all we do and say. None of us are guaranteed tomorrow. We never know what this day will bring. So why do we put off preparing our hearts to receive the love of God through Christ?

In 1928, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in one of his Advent sermons about our struggle to be ready for the day of God’s coming. He said:

“It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming, so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God. . . . We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near

to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience. Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us,

God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.”

-Kathryn M. Schifferdecker 12-6-09 workingpreacher.org

The good news of Christmas is earth shattering good news! The God of the universe seeks to judge, forgive and love us. God Almighty chose to be in our midst through Jesus. Jesus comes to bring us back to right relationship with God. This was good news for long ago, and is still good news for us today!

That good news is how Mark’s Gospel begins. Not with a manger in Bethlehem, but with a proclamation: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” (v1)

Mark never tries to capture all of Jesus’ story in his writing. Rather, he seeks to capture the core of the story of Emmanuel, God with us, and how Jesus is good news to each and every one of us.

Jesus is good news to ordinary fishermen and those in need of healing. Jesus is good news to those seeking to understand God’s kingdom ways. Jesus is good news to Jairus’ daughter and the man from Gerasene. Jesus is good news to children and to widows. Jesus is good news for you and I today.

God loves us! God is with us! And God’s work continues through us!

This is the good news that we begin to celebrate at Christmas, we continue to celebrate at Easter, and we learn how to share through our faith and our lives throughout the rest of the year.

As Pastor David Lose reminds us,

…the Christmas story for which we are preparing to hear is not the end of our Advent celebrations or even its climax, but rather just the beginning. In this sense, Mark’s opening invites a new hearing of the story of Jesus so that we can launch into another year of participating in God’s ongoing work to love and bless the world.

--David Lose “Beginnings” davidlose.net

When we prepare for Christ at Christmas, we prepare not only our hearts to receive him,

but our lives to respond to him. We repent and change our ways. We recognize where we have gone wrong, and live in response to God’s love and grace.

When we respond to God’s love with our love, Jesus’ ministry continues. Through us. In every gesture of love and forgiveness and grace, big or small.

We share God’s love with the world around us when we wear our masks, when we purchase local, when we are mindful with whom we gather, when we support charities and ministries near and far. We share God’s love when we call or send cards or find an alternate way to worship or study or serve together. We share God’s love when we live by the fruits of the Spirit

in our interactions with strangers, family and friends, showing kindness and patience and peace.

This Advent, as we continue on the journey toward Christmas, may we continue to live by hope,

that God’s promises will be fulfilled. May we continue to live by love, sharing the love we have received with everyone around us. May we continue to pause, ponder and prepare for God’s presence with us. May we be ready not only for the coming of Christmas, but also for the coming of Christ.

In closing today, I invite you to reflect on the good news of Christ’s coming

through words written by Madeleine L’Engle in her poem *“First Coming.”*

..He did not wait till the world was ready,

till men and nations were at peace

He came when the Heavens were unsteady

and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.

He came when the need was deep and great.

He dined with sinners in all their grime,

turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came

to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

To a world like ours, of anguished shame

He came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,

to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.

In the mystery of the Word made Flesh

the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane

to raise our songs with joyful voice,

for to share our grief, to touch our pain,

He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

--thepastorsworkshop.com:Advent

Let us pray: God of grace, we are thankful that you came into our world even when the world was not ready. We are thankful you come into our lives even amid our pain and sorrow. May we receive your good news this day, of a Savior born for us, a Savior who died for us, a Savior risen for us. Then may we prepare our lives to share such good news with others, through our faith and faithfulness to your Word and your ways. Guide us to heed the call of John, this day and every day. Guide us on our Advent journeys. Amen.