

“Make the Paths Straight”
The Second Sunday in Advent – December 6, 2020 – Mark 1:1-8/B

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us Pray: We praise you, O God, for this circle of light that marks our days of preparation for Christ's advent. As we light the Bethlehem candle, kindle within us the fire of your Spirit, and a passion to work for Peace among the nations. Enlighten us with your grace, that we may welcome others as you have welcomed us. Grant this through Christ our Lord, whose coming is certain and whose day draws near.

Advent I, that beginning of Advent which points us not to a manger but to Jesus coming through the clouds and returning in glory to reign over us, is done. It's almost as if we have come through the turbulence and the captain has turned off the seat belt sign so you can move about the cabin. Now we can forget about how strange it must feel to actually yearn for God to return in flesh, and turn our attention to when God came in flesh...wait. Isn't this the 2nd Sunday of Advent? The one where we can officially think about Christmas as we light the 2nd candle on our wreath, the Bethlehem candle? Isn't today the day when we can unabashedly decorate and get that Christmas Spirit going? If the subdivision across the street from the church is any indication, it looks like Christmas is tomorrow. And as I drove home after Wednesday Vespers last week, they are not alone. The whole county is lit up with beautiful, shimmering glorious lights. I know it makes me feel better. I hope it holds - so that Christmas Day is not the end of the Season of Nativity, but truly the beginning of the Twelve Traditional Days of Christmas. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Imagine. You have taken seriously the KEEP AWAKE of last week's gospel and you have embraced the task I spoke of at midweek to Bring. Your. Hope. You are embracing the waiting and preparing and being patient in your home and you are watching for what is to come. Imagine that, just down the street from your house, or out in the back yard, or in the woods next door you spy a stranger. An odd-looking fellow almost naked except for the animal skins, staff and sandals. Looks like he might be homeless, with a beard and long hair that hasn't seen brush or soap for far too long. He's scraggly looking. Perhaps you consider calling the authorities, for he absolutely positively doesn't belong in your neighborhood!

Enter, John the Baptist. A stopover encounter on the way to Jesus. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. While he may seem like the last person you'd take seriously, John was actually quite the leader! He ate locusts, the only insect considered clean – which meant he was following the dietary laws. He lived in the wilderness – the place where people went to isolate themselves and commune with God. He offered a ritual to those who wished to turn their lives around – and people flocked to him to hear more about God and a different way to “do” their faith.

Yes, John was a voice crying out in the wilderness. And he was used by God in a powerful way. His whole life was spent in the moment that he pointed to Jesus, the Christ, “ordained him with water and crowned him with the Spirit” as he stepped out of the center of the story and the spotlight. John, who knew when to make himself scarce, and he knew when and to whom he might sharpen his words. He was a prophet who spoke truth to power. He was a forerunner to Jesus – stirring up the waters; breaking up the soil – preparing the hearts of those around him to be ready to receive the words of mercy and grace that Jesus would speak for the next three years.

Some things never change – and most of us are glad of that. But this year’s holidays look (not just a little different) but a lot different from what we have come to know over our lifetimes. There is a sense that people of faith have taken a hit from our own culture; that the church was losing its meaning even before the pandemic began – an aging institution bound by meaningless traditions and misunderstood practices. A stalwart for those who felt comfortable, and yet found it harder and harder to be relevant for new generations.

There is a rawness around us now, a tone that encourages division. We are standing our ground and setting our jaws against change and vulnerability just as the leaders of the Temple were doing when John arrived on the scene. As he began to prepare folks’ hearts for the love of God in Christ Jesus, the leadership became afraid, and they started protecting and preserving their positions and way of life, forgetting the reason that they had been set apart as God’s Chosen People. They forgot how to *“love the Lord their God with all their heart and all their mind and all their strength, and their neighbor as themselves.”*

In his book, ***The End of Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors***, John Compton asserts that the church hasn’t changed, but our culture has, and it is in our overall embrace of rugged individualism that we have all turned inward. Scholar Walter Brueggemann summarizes Compton’s thesis, “...a focus on individual needs and wants: self-actualizing, self-securing, self-satisfying, (these are) all pursuits that are incongruous with love of neighbor...” The outcome of this shift is that having individualized goals moves us away from community, from neighborly values and commitments. We seem to have lost our empathy -our compassion - that “feeling with” that draws us together with others. And in doing so, says Brueggemann, we have lost sight of the fact that compassion and mercy are the bedrock of who God is: *The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. Ps 145.*

If, therefore, God is full of compassion, we who are called to do God’s work, should also be compassionate – however counter-cultural that is in these days. And in doing this work, we put ourselves in the great company of those who go about Preparing the Way of the Lord, lifting up valleys that pull people down – dissolving the mountains into molehills of manageable size to overcome – levelling uneven ground and the rough spots we must endure, and bringing equity to the playing field for all those who participate in the game of life.

And then, oh then my friends of Advent, ***then*** “the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it ***together***...for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.” When God uses us as God used John the Baptizer, people will be changed – the whole creation will breathe – and our Christmas will come for real. We are watching for you, John. We are waiting for you Jesus. We are preparing our hearts and living in hope, because that is what we followers of Emmanuel, God-with-us, DO. Amen.

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Resources: Walter Brueggemann, for Day1; Psalm 145:8-9;