

Preparing the Way For the Lord  
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-6, 11  
Second Sunday in Advent  
December 6, 2020

Today we hear from Isaiah and Matthew. Unlike the other gospel writers, Matthew's focus was primarily for the Jews. Today Matthew directs our attention to John the Baptist. We always hear from John early in Advent because John proclaims the coming of Christ. In the Gospel today, we have John the Baptist on center stage.

Every Advent when this happens I think of the story of a minister who had visited a family quite a few times for one thing or another. The children had reached the point of recognizing the minister, but didn't know his name. He came to the door one evening and one of the children answered the door then shouted to her parents, "Mom, Dad, that man is here again!" Every Advent, I want to say the same thing about John the Baptist – "That man is here again!" He "prepares the way" and gets us ready. So here we go.

Matthew often has Old Testament images in mind. He tells us that John was prophesying in the wilderness. He is dressed like the formidable ancient prophet Elijah. He is eating locusts, recalling one of the ten plagues God brought upon Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Quite the wild man, don't you think? Would we even feel comfortable having them in church today? Probably not.

John's wilderness is an unforgiving, unrelenting desert where Moses and the people learned the harsh lessons of dependence on God. Here in the desert, John the Baptist -- the first great biblical prophet after a hiatus of 400 years is inviting people to leave their homes and occupations and come away with him -- away from the maddening crowds in order to find themselves and God, for "the Kingdom of God is at hand," John blusters.

As you might imagine, John would not be the life of the party! And yet, strange as it may seem, John is inviting us also to a spiritual readiness that is essential if we are to comprehend the mystery of Christmas. So this is our time, too, when John is speaking to us. Matthew's basic Advent theme in a nutshell is this: Christ is coming, ready or not.

But before we can understand what Advent can mean for us, we need to take a look at what the coming of Christ meant for the people at that time. The prophets of old foretold about a time in the future when the messiah would come. But people had been waiting for years – hundreds of years. So this wild man named John came to tell the people that the time had come, and he was the one who was to herald the coming of Jesus.

Was this too incredible to believe? Could they trust someone like John? And how could a baby be born to a virgin? How could God become one of us? And why would he be born in a

stable? Why not in a royal palace like a king? This was confusing to the Jewish people, who expected someone who was cut out of the same cloth as King David.

So many questions. So few answers. None of it seemed to make sense, or did it? Could it be that God would come in a way that no one could ever dream or imagine? What if they were to discover God in their very midst? In the ordinary? After all, that is what the word Emmanuel means -- God with us. That should be a clue.

Likewise for us, the Christ event is whenever and wherever we experience God in our midst. God is in the muck, mire and marvel of our everyday life, or a candle flickering in our darkness, or a crack of daylight under our door. Can we stop in the midst of our busyness to look for the light? That's what Advent is about.

We have to have a sense of watchfulness to recognize God in our midst. Sooner or later if we're lucky, we realize that God is here in the world and in our lives right now . . . but is also coming again, in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Advent gives us another chance to discover the mystery and miracle of Christmas. We like to think we are more sophisticated than John's audience . . . that we've figured it out. No more surprises. But what will Christmas bring?

\* \* \*

I was reading this little piece recently about the people in John's day. It rings true as we read the Christmas story. Here is how it goes:

They expected a king, they got a baby.  
 They expected a royal mansion, they got a stable.  
 They expected a royal nursery, they got a manger.  
 They expected robes, they got swaddling clothes.  
 They expected courtiers, they got shepherds and wise men.  
 They expected a royal birth, they got an unwed mother on a donkey.  
 They expected a mover and a shaker, they got a carpenter.  
 They expected a King on a white stallion claiming his throne,  
 They got a Messiah riding into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey.  
 They expected a throne, they got a cross.  
 They expected riches, they got parables.  
 They expected glory and honor, they got a crucifixion.  
 They expected a Savior, but not like this.

\* \* \*

God is always ready to break through the barriers of every day life in order to compel us, embrace us, and challenge us. Advent reminds us of the great gift Jesus made available to us, and it urges us to use this gift. The season of Advent reminds us that the words in today's Scripture readings were intended not just for the people of biblical times, but for people like us today. One of the first things John the Baptist said was, "Repent, for the kingdom of

heaven has come near." (3:2) Prepare a road in your heart for the Lord. Turn away from your sins. "The one who will come after me is much greater than I am," John reiterates.

The very word Advent means "to come." And it means the same thing for us as it did for people in Jesus' time. How will Jesus come to you this Christmas? The answer is as unique as you are. Fortunately, there is time. There is time to get ready.

When I think about John in the desert wilderness, telling us to prepare our hearts, I am struck by the parallels in this season of covid. We have all been thrust into the desert wilderness, and not by our own choosing. The pandemic has forced millions into a barren landscape, surrounding by suffering, death, and fear. It is a time of great anxiety and mental anguish for many.

This is our desert. This is our wilderness, when all the ways we are used to coping have been stripped away, until we are left vulnerable and empty, with few resources to manage. Perhaps if we listen closely, we can hear the voice of John crying out in such a wilderness, and speaking a word in these desolate times. *"Make the roads straight; prepare a way into your heart, for one is coming who is greater than me."*

The words today from the prophet Isaiah are less harsh:

*11:1 "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
11:2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD."  
11:5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.  
11:10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. (11:1-2, 5-10)*

Perhaps in a time of emptiness and dislocation, these ancient words will be fulfilled, when people will be comforted, and the promise of God's own son will come again – not in some apocalyptic cloud or trumpet blast, but quietly, surely, into each heart that is now so empty and despondent.

Advent can prepare that kind of place, and give rise to that kind of hope. Are you ready? Ready for some good news? Ready for comfort and hope? The message is not a vaccination, but a revelation.

In closing, I would also say, allow the sacrament of communion today to do its work. Allow it to feed you and sustain you and give you strength. I cannot think of a better gift on this advent journey than the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Let us eat and drink as we prepare for the One whom Isaiah and John said was to come. It won't be long. Amen.

Isaiah 11:1-10

11:1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

11:2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

11:3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;

11:4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

11:5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

11:6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

11:7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

11:8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the viper, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

11:9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

11:10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-6, 11 (NRSV)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup>This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

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

<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>11</sup>“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.