

All Earth Is Waiting - Advent 2009

Preparing 12-13-09

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Luke 3:3-14

³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' ¹¹In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' ¹²Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

Prepare the way of the Lord! Prepare. We know about preparing, don't we? If you are a student, you either are or just finished

preparing to take your final exams. You know better than to just show up for a test of that magnitude without preparing. In this season, there is much preparation for holiday gatherings. If you are hosting a group of family or friends, I think it is pretty certain that you will prepare. You may be making food or decorating the place or sending invitations or cleaning the house. Then there's preparations involved in the giving of gifts. In this season, we probably think a lot about gifts! A common greeting in December - maybe as much as talk of weather - might be to ask if you are ready for Christmas or if you have all your Christmas shopping done. We know about preparing, don't we?

In Advent, we think about preparing for the birth of a child. I remember what that involved for Tim and I nearly 22 years ago. When we received the news that I was pregnant, everything changed. Life took on new meaning and purpose. It became important to live more intentionally. I read every book I could get my hands on about how to have a healthy pregnancy and on the development of babies, and on the birthing process. I gave up caffeine and chocolate! I cut down on

sweets and ate more fruits and vegetables. I took vitamins every day, exercised more, tried to get proper sleep, and saw my doctor regularly. I went to my Lamaze birthing classes and found special music to have playing in the background as I gave birth. Then, as time drew closer, just as the Lamaze instructor has told me, I began "nesting." It became very important that the baby's room be cleared of excess stuff and set up to receive our child. Everything, whether it was in the baby's room or not, needed to be cleaned and pictures needed to be hung. It was incredibly important that everything be ready for this new life that was coming.

I suspect that many of us have had reasons in our lives to make such preparations, whether for a new baby or a new pet or to have a parent come and stay with us, or a guest from another country, or to be able to demonstrate mastery of an area of study. Anything worthwhile is worth preparing for. Anything important in life ultimately changes us and causes us to grow. Part of preparing is clearing out that which might stunt or get in the way of our growth.

And part of preparing is setting up spaces and structures and frameworks that increase the potential for growth and the possibility of new life and vision and purpose.

The gospel writer, Luke, tells of preparing the way of the Lord. In our scripture reading this morning we heard of John the Baptist, that prophet out in the wilderness preparing people for the coming of the Messiah. Did you just imagine the scene? John is out there preaching to the people, about how the one sent by God is coming. And people must have been listening because crowds came out to where John was preaching. Now John was a bit more fire and brimstone than Jesus. He warned the people about what might happen if they were not ready. So how is it that you prepare for the coming of God's reign? Well, John was all too eager to tell people. "Repent!" How do you prepare for the birth of the holy one? "Repent!"

Now before we go any further, I need to tell you what repentance is not, because the word has been used in ways that are not at all helpful. Repentance is not saying, "I'm sorry." That should be clear

from John's words in our story this morning. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." In other words, don't think you can say you're sorry, but keep on doing or saying or believing the same things. "I'm sorry" are meaningless words unless they are followed by a genuine change in attitude and action. Repentance is also not about feeling guilty or being down on yourself. Repentance is turning. Turning from the direction you were going and realigning yourself with God. Repentance is about change and new vision and acting on that vision.

The crowds who came to hear John preach asked him, "What then should we do?" And what came was very practical, specific ideas.

"Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To the tax collectors he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the soldiers he said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." This may seem obvious, but it was quite common practice for Tax Collectors to take a cut and for Soldiers to get perks because of their position. Repentance for

these professions meant taking the higher ground. Going above and beyond what was acceptable to a better way. Repentance as a way to prepare the way for the coming reign of God takes concrete action that opens the way for God's love to rule and God's justice to find a home.

What do you suppose John would say to you and to me? Certainly he would encourage us to be generous in giving to others and caring about those who have less than we do. But then, he might say to the teachers to be careful not to misuse your power in relationship to your students. Be for them a living example. To the preachers he might warn to practice what we preach. To the store cashier he might say to be honest in all dealings even when you are irritated. To the Police officers he might say to treat each person with dignity and respect. To the business owner he might say to treat your employees fairly. To everyone John might encourage forgiveness and grace as a matter of course. For it is all too easy to stand in judgment over others while overlooking our own shortcomings.

Advent is a holy season of waiting for God's love to be born in all its fullness. It is a holy season of watching for the signs of God's love all around us; signs of hope and peace. Advent is also a season of preparing our hearts and our lives and our world for God's love to be the strongest force guiding all we do and say. The first Sunday of Advent I encouraged you to take some moments of each day and spend them in silence. I asked you to try to come to the silence in a listening mode without a list of what you want, just open to receiving a word from God. That is part of preparing the way of love being born anew this Christmas. Last week I told you the story of Papa Panov and his dream that Jesus was coming to him at Christmas. Because he was watching and expecting Jesus to come, he opened his home and his heart and his treasures to share with strangers in need. Watching and expecting Jesus to meet us in surprising ways is part of preparing the way of love being born anew this Christmas. And now this week John tells us that preparing the way for God's rule to take hold in our lives

is to repent of behaviors and attitudes that are out of sync with God's way of love and justice and compassion.

Advent is a time to clear out the things that keep us from receiving and experiencing God's love born anew transforming our lives and our community and our world for good. And, it is a time of setting up room for the new, life-changing thing waiting to be born. Part of the Christmas story is that there was no room at the inn. More than just a cute story, that is a metaphor for how it is that God tries to enter our lives in unexpected or unconventional ways and yet, so often we have the "No vacancy" sign out and miss God's presence in our midst.

As we prepare ourselves, that God might find room at the inn of our hearts, what are the attitudes we need to clear out; the baggage we need to dump; the direction we need to change? That is the stuff of repentance as we prepare the way for love - for a new attitude - one that believes in the power of God to transform the world and bring heaven and peace on earth. May we prepare room for God's love to be born in us this Christmas. Amen.