

Isaiah 40:1-11
Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1-8

December 6, 2020

2020 CHRISTMAS PREPARATION

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A Google search of the two words “Christmas Preparations” resulted in about 28,500,000 results in 0.46 seconds! Here are a very few of the top sites:

* from minted.com — Best 2020 Christian Preparation Checklist: The Complete Christmas Checklist for an Organized Holiday. The site suggested you begin your preparation two or more months before Christmas (around October 20-31). The date was last updated on July 8, 2020 (that’s planning ahead!)

* from household-management-101.com — Christmas Preparations This Week to Make Your Christmas Stress Free

* from graceinmyspace.com — 3 Simple Christmas Preparations for Hosting Guests

* And, of course, there is always Pinterest with 500+ Christmas Preparation Ideas in 2020 (I don’t know about you, but the title alone stresses me out!)

Our 2020 Christmas Preparation is certainly different in the middle of a pandemic. Cyber Monday set a record with a 15.1% increase over last year with a total of \$10.8 billion dollars in sales. Mall and other store sales were down, but not as much as experts expected, as they implemented curbside pickup and reservation times for shopping. Family gatherings are being scaled back or canceled. Travel is curtailed and involves quarantining before and/or after the visit. Our weekly Advent worship services and Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion service will be online only. Yes, 2020 Christmas Preparation is different!

One great loss this season is not getting to hear David Sanderson begin the Community Messiah program with “Comfort Ye, My People” in his beautiful tenor voice — “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” But we do hear those words on this second Sunday of Advent in Mark’s story about John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness.

As they say, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck. Well, John looked like a prophet, sounded like a prophet, and acted like a prophet, and, indeed, he was a prophet. More specifically, with his distinct clothing and diet in the wilderness, he reminded the people of Judea and Jerusalem of the prophet Elijah. Tradition held that when Elijah returned, the Messiah was soon to follow. And that’s exactly what is happening with John’s appearance in the wilderness on the banks of the Jordan River. The gospel of John tells us, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the

light.” (John 1:6-8) Mark’s story tells us the same thing in the quotation from the prophets Isaiah and Malachi — “I am sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way . . . Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.”

“Prepare the way of the Lord!” That begs the question, not only for the Judeans and Jerusalemites standing in line by the Jordan River but also for us today: How do we prepare the way of the Lord for 2020 Christmas?

Then there’s the story about the painter who answered the advertisement to paint a white frame church out in the country. He negotiated a fee of \$4000 total for labor and materials. Somehow he persuaded the good church folks to pay him the entire amount upfront. He figured he would buy only half the paint needed, water it down, and make a very nice profit. Every day the church members would come by and compliment him on his work. On his last day, the forecast was for heavy rain in the afternoon, so he hurried and finished painting the steeple. As he climbed down from the ladder and stepped back to look at his work, the heavens opened, the rain poured down, and, to his horror, all of the paint began to run off the church building. Just then there was a peal of thunder and a tremendous crack of lightning and the painter fell to knees, ashamed of what he had done. He cried out, “Lord, I’m sorry. What do I need to do?” And a heavenly voice boomed, “Repaint, repaint, and thin no more!”

That’s funny, but true repentance is no laughing matter, but that doesn’t mean it is a joyless matter. John came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and the people responded by confessing their sins and getting baptized in the Jordan River. In Luke’s version of the story, the crowds point blank ask John, “What then should we do?” and John gives them some down-to-earth, specific instructions, “If you have two coats, share. If you have food, do the same. If you’re a tax collector, don’t cheat the people. If you’re a soldier, don’t use your position to extort the people.” (Luke 3:10-14)

In his book, *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent* Richard Rohr writes, “Let me sum it up this way: We do not think ourselves into a new way of living. We live ourselves into new ways of thinking. Without action and lifestyle decisions, without concrete practices, words are dangerous and largely illusory.”¹

Over the past couple of years and in different settings, I have shared a YouTube video called “Advent in 2 Minutes.” For the most part, the video is very good at explaining that the season of Advent does not mean getting ready for Christmas by decorating and baking and buying presents and rushing around. Instead, as the scriptures remind us, Advent is a time for expectant waiting, hopeful anticipation, and joyful preparation for the coming of the Christ.

However, there is one section of the video that I take issue with, especially in light of John the Baptist’s preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” About halfway through the video, it says “Advent is different from Lent because it’s a season of hope, not repentance. Lent is a spring cleaning of our lives. Advent is a cozier time, like getting your home ready to welcome a special guest.”

Well, Advent certainly is a season of hope and like getting your home ready to welcome a special guest. But Advent is also certainly a season of repentance. Repent-

ance is preparation, and it's a preparation that extends well beyond just the four weeks leading up to our Christmas celebration. Repentance means a change of mind, a turning around, a turning away from dead works and ways that lead to death and a turning to ways that lead to God and to life. As Richard Rohr says, "Without action and lifestyle decisions, without concrete practices, words are dangerous and largely illusory." As Jesus himself said, "for each tree is known by its own fruit." (Luke 6:44)

Our 2020 Christmas Preparation is certainly different but, just as in every year, it will come to an end. The decorations will be packed up and put in the attic, the tree will be placed on the curb or taken to the landfill, gifts will be returned, and the world will move on. But repentance as preparation is ongoing and a lifelong journey, as our baptisms remind us. Our "Directory for Worship" tells us that "Baptism is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to grace. Through baptism, Jesus Christ calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through baptism, the Holy Spirit gives the Church its identity and commissions the Church for service in the world."²

In her book, *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris writes about teaching art in parochial schools. She introduces her students to the psalms by having them write their own psalms, including psalms expressing sadness and anger. She says, "I believe that the writing process offers them a safe haven in which to work through their desires for vengeance in a healthy way." Listen to her description of a little boy's poem which he titled "The Monster Who Was Sorry."

"He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: 'Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, "I shouldn't have done all that."' 'My messy house' says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?"³

In our 2020 Christmas Preparation, as we buy, wrap, decorate, bake, and clean our houses, let us clean up the messy houses of our hearts and make them into places where our Lord and Savior Jesus might wish to dwell.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, make us watchful and keep us faithful as we await the coming of your Son our Lord; that, when he shall appear, he may not find us sleeping in sin but active in his service and joyful in his praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Richard Rohr, *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent* (Franciscan Media, 2012)

²Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order 2017-2019* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2017) Section W-3.0402: Theology of Baptism, p. 92.

³Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), pp. 69-70.