

## Prepare Ye the Way

Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-13, Romans 15:1-13

Good morning all! I am so glad you're here, because I realize—only too well—that there are only 15 shopping days left until Christmas, so may God richly bless you this morning for coming today... because, judging by the commercials on TV and the decorations at the mall, at least—at the very least—since Hallowe'en we have been living in anticipation of December 25<sup>th</sup>. Your house is probably decorated in red and green and gold, the tree is twinkling with lights... the cookies have been baked, greeting cards have been addressed and sent, and many of you, far better prepared than I am, have already started, or perhaps even completed, your Christmas shopping. You've made your lists and checked them twice, the kids have met with Santa and so now we are poised in extended anticipation and readiness. For heaven's sake let's get on with it—it's Christmastime! .....Isn't it?

So what a disconnect it must be: Here at church we do not sing carols in worship, but instead rather moody songs of yearning and darkness. And to top it off, today you are greeted by a wild-eyed man in a hair shirt who shrieks at you from the wilderness: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" I guess it's not surprising that you never see inflatable John the Baptists glowing on anyone's front lawn this season... in fact, this guy is conspicuously absent from any commercial proclamations of the coming of Christmas... and yet... and yet... every Gospel writer included John as the necessary precursor to Jesus, and even Peter preached that the good news began in Galilee with the baptism that John announced (Acts 10:37). So, you see, we can't really ignore this banshee from the bundu who points his boney finger into our hearts and says: Repent! For the Kingdom of heaven has come near.

The truth is, it is not Christmastime at all. Christmastime starts with the Birth Day, but this is the pregnant, expectant, introspective time called Advent... the time of coming and becoming... of all the times of the year, ironically enough, when the church is called to be most profoundly counter-cultural - to stand somber and silent in the midst of the swirling, singing, spending hubbub; so that you may encounter all that you most truly long for - the deepest yearnings within your heart - not just sugar plum dreams, but the very real promise of the hopes and fears of all the years met in the reality of a living God who promises—*promises*—to dwell among us. Above all the other banter, listen to this voice which calls to us through the ages -  
Prepare ye the way of the Lord!

*Let us pray: We do yearn for you Lord... so give us the courage to listen to the one who proclaims your coming. Give us the faith to hear John's call as Good News inviting us into the transformative repentance that prepares room in our hearts for you. Empty us enough to be filled with your presence and your peace. Amen.*

Let every heart prepare him room...Prepare the way of the Lord. The way the Christian calendar works, before the angels or shepherds or wise men show up, John the Baptist comes to put us in the right frame of mind to meet our Savior, who is Christ the Lord. His message is a strange and unexpected one, especially right now, when we are so busy... John reminds us who celebrate so gladly the first coming of Christ, that we are to be ready for the second coming of Jesus, who returns with his winnowing fork in his hand at harvest time to separate the wheat from the chaff—the useful from the useless, the beating heart from the empty husk. And so note that John turns to the Pharisees and Sadducees—the churchgoers and law-abiders of his day, the ones who were sure they already knew the Way... and he says to them: Repent!

Now the biblical words for repentance do not exactly mean what you might think they mean. Repentance is not about apologizing or feeling sorry for what we've done, or who we've been, or how we've lived our lives, although that sense of pain and regret is almost certainly a part of the experience. Rather, in Hebrew the word for repentance means to turn—to gain a different perspective, or to return—to return from exile, to return to life in the presence of God. In Greek, the word for repentance means to be transformed, to go beyond the mind you have, to clear out the clutter and distractions so that you can see fully the vision that God has for you and for our world. Our most important pre-Christmas task turns out to be repentance - that requires that we drop all excuses and defenses and pretensions, dare to expose our truest selves, naked and vulnerable, to God's loving gaze, and yield in obedience to the caress of the Holy Spirit. And isn't that what we most truly yearn for—to be known at our deepest core and loved indeed?

.....John says that we Prepare the Way of the Lord by repentance such as this.....

The apostle Paul was writing to the Church in Rome, which had experienced various struggles and disagreements. Paul paints a picture of what it means to live in beloved community as the children of God, and it strikes me that it that sounds a lot like this repentant posture we are called to hold before God. Drop all pretensions and excuses; risk real relationship by being open and vulnerable; practice reconciliation and active cooperation, and do everything in your power to live in harmony with each other. Notice that harmony does not mean uniformity or monotony, not at all!

In fact, Paul provides an extended set of quotes that rejoice in the reality that through Christ, God's grace has reached beyond Israel to include all peoples, and it is still possible—no necessary!—for all your diverse voices to harmonize together so that with one voice you may glorify God, and welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. In this way, you can model to the world the very real possibility of what it means to live together in peace and joy, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is what it looks like for the Kingdom of Heaven to be near.

This is the same vision that Martin Luther King caught and preached more recently with such passion: the vision of living together in beloved community. We in the church know well that living in beloved community isn't easy. It's demanding and difficult... it requires that we share God's vision and expectations of ourselves. As many years that have gone by since Paul first taught this lesson and as many years that have passed since Dr. King was killed for preaching it too, it seems that we still have some repenting to do, for this is what it means to prepare the way of the Lord.

The prophet Isaiah painted a picture of a world where this beloved community becomes reality... where former enemies live happily side-by-side, where little children play safely among the adder and the asp, where on all the holy mountain there is no harm or destruction, where the whole earth is full of the knowledge and fear of the Lord... where the Prince of Peace reigns over all.....

The stark disconnect between this picture and those in our newspapers and on our TV screens makes it evident that indeed, much repentance is still required... for a war-torn, strife-ridden reality is all around us... I don't need to repeat the headlines, for you can find there for yourselves plenty of evidence of our brokenness and our disharmony. Clearly, we are still living in a world that is far from the Paul's vision of Christian community or Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom.

But what if ... as we so breathlessly wait for the coming of the Kingdom of God among us... what if in fact, God is waiting breathlessly for us? What if all the coming and becoming of Advent is about our delivery—birthing forth the Christ that even now dwells within us? What if - in this Advent time - we are called to shine the light of Christ into the darkness around us, by living as people who have caught the vision of the peaceable kingdom... modeled on the one who came not as powerful leader or arrogant master, but as one who kneels at the feet of his friends, and says to them "Love one another as I have loved you?" Is not this what we most deeply yearn for at Advent?

If we slow down to see more clearly, and if we listen more carefully into all the noise around us, I believe there is evidence that the Kingdom of Heaven is drawing near. It's there in all the myriad ways you find to care and serve and share. It's there in the piles of gifts for the Baldwin Center. It's there in the companionship and prayers of the knitting circle. It's there in the compassion of the Stephen Ministry. It's there in the exuberance of Wednesday night Logos. It's there in the love and encouragement in shoeboxes of care for soldiers overseas. I saw it most vividly on the trip to Pearlinton, where the profound proof of the dawning reign of God was evident in the way that those who went to bring change found themselves most profoundly transformed, learning about faith and hope, a spirit of humility and the beloved community abounding in the people whose very lives had been turned upside down by Katrina. On that trip to Pearlinton, those who slept in tents away from their own families at Thanksgiving experienced Thanksgiving in all its deepest meanings as they participated with our ever-creating Creator to bring love out of grief, hope from despair, resurrection of new life out of chaos.

Yes, during this Advent season it is most evident that we are a strange community of people who do not march to the same drumbeat as the rest of the world. While everything around us urges us to join the frenetic dance, we slow down to look around us, to look inside us. For we know that we live in that shadowy time between darkness and light, between the Already Come and the Not Yet Done. We know that we are called not to fill ourselves with all the goodies that seduce us, but rather to empty ourselves in order to prepare him room... to humble ourselves, harmonize our hearts, and to point to the day when the lion shall lie down with the lamb and a little child shall lead them.

Certainly we are still imperfect and very incomplete and much repentance is required: a constant turning and returning, a renewing of our minds, a surrender of ourselves ... but we can practice... practice... practice... practice love and joy and hope and peace until Thy Kingdom come ... Come this Advent season, together let us Prepare the Way of the Lord.