

VOICES CRYING OUT

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79

Today is the Second Sunday in the Season of Advent. During the Season of Advent we are focused the momentous event of Christmas. But what is Advent really all about? Advent is about preparation: preparation for the coming of Christ and all that his coming means for our lives. Advent is about looking backward and about looking forward. We look back to the birth of the Christ Child and the new kingdom he initiated in the world, and we look forward to the Second coming of Christ, when the kingdom will be realized. And both these events require ... demand ... our attention and our preparation. Advent is a state of mind as well as a season in the church year. Advent is not intended to simply be the time where life speeds up as we add a million new tasks to our already- busy lives, to prepare for Christmas. It is rather a season in which we make present again that miraculous event as we prepare for Christ's second coming, the return of Christ to complete what he began so very long ago. Advent is, therefore a season which offers us the opportunity to pray for Christ's return and prepare for his second coming, when the world as we know it will end and creation as God intended it is brought to fruition.

Into our busy-ness each year enters John. He interrupts our schedules and demands that we make preparations of another kind. And so it is that we focus our attention on the prophetic voices "crying out". In particular, we turn our attention to the Gospel according to Luke, who tells of "the son of Zachariah" who comes to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." John the Baptizer tells all who will hear that the way to prepare for Jesus' coming is to REPENT! Before we can bask in Christmas joy John demands that we truly get ready for Jesus.

There was a time when repentance meant to express deep sorrow and regret for our sins. But today Advent has been turned into a contemplative season in which we are invited to contemplate future possibilities and how we might live faithfully between Christ' first and second comings, between the already and the not yet of God's new creation.

To repent, therefore takes on a new and different meaning, namely to reflect on the direction we are traveling both as faithful disciples and as the Body of Christ – the church – and change course when necessary.

As we reflect upon our journey to make sure we are sailing in the right direction, we have the unique opportunity to recommit to a vision of God's reign and truly make our focus, as a church, on the Second Coming of Christ. John's bold preaching in the wilderness called people to get ready, to examine their lives, their values, and their priorities. If we are to receive the Prince of Peace, then we must be willing to go through the detailed preparation process. Outside the church, people are drinking eggnog and singing along with Bing Crosby, while hanging popcorn garlands on the tree. But in worship, we, the people of God, hears the challenging words of John the Baptist, confronting us, commanding our attention, and demanding a response. Repent and prepare!

That kind of self-examination and preparation is often difficult. It can be down-right painful. In the process, we may remember that God's way is not our way. We may discern that God's future is not the future we desire. We need to reflect on our lives, and the life of this church, to be sure that the future we live for is the future God, envisions the future God desires.

First, we need to make room for God. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." It is often easier to do the perfunctory work of religious activity, than to be the church in the world, serving our Lord.

Second, we need to get rid of everything in our lives that is a barrier to God. When John spoke the words of the Prophet Isaiah about leveling of the mountains and the lifting up the valleys he was pointing to a world where "good news" was a reality. He was speaking of the kind of world it would be when God is TRULY in charge, a world Jesus said his ministry would be all about.

Evangelist Luis Palau tells the story of a wealthy European family that decided to have their baby baptized. Dozens of guests were invited to the elaborate affair, and as they all arrived at the mansion dressed to the nines, they deposited their elegant wraps on a bed in an upstairs room. The guests were entertained royally. Soon it came time for the main event – the infant's baptism. But where was the baby? No one seemed to know. The child's governess ran upstairs and returned with a desperate look on her face. Everyone frantically searched. Finally, someone recalled having seen her asleep on one of the beds. The baby was buried beneath a pile of coats, jackets, and furs. The object of the day's celebration had been forgotten, neglected, and nearly smothered. The baby whose birthday we celebrate at Christmas may also be hidden beneath the piles of stuff we pile on during this season. We need to enter Advent asking, "Where's the baby?"

This Second Sunday in Advent I invite you to ponder on these words:

"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.'"

Amen.