



December 3, 2006
Advent 1

Luke 1:57-66

Prepare the Way of the Lord

1. God's Hand Is on You

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Well, you've got less than four weeks to get ready for Christmas, and there are an awful lot of preparations to complete. There's a house to decorate and a tree to set up, cards to buy, write, and drop in the mail, presents to purchase and wrap, all that baking, parties to attend, and travel arrangements to make. The question at Advent is: how will you do all of that and still get ready for Christmas?

Today I am beginning a series of Advent sermons on the life and ministry of John the Baptist. Now I know that John the Baptist is not typically thought of as one of the characters of the nativity. He doesn't show up in our Christmas pageants. I've never seen him in a crèche. He doesn't even make it into our favorite Christmas carols. Frankly, John the Baptist just doesn't give us the same warm feeling we have about Mary, Joseph, and their baby, surrounded by shepherds, wise men, and lowing cattle. So who invited John the Baptist for the holidays?

Well, the Gospels did. In fact, all four of them begin to tell the story of Jesus' ministry by talking about John. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is portrayed beginning his work only after John is arrested, as if the mantle of ministry has been passed to him. In Luke 7:28 Jesus calls John the greatest human being ever to live. According to the Gospel of St. John, a different John, the disciples of the Baptist once complained that many of his followers were leaving to follow Jesus. John the Baptist responded by saying, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." (3:28-30)

In all the weddings you've attended have you ever seen the best man shove the groom out of the way because he was getting too much attention? No, prior to the wedding the best man's job is to help the groom with preparations. And at the wedding his job is just to stand there and be thrilled for the groom. John the Baptist used this analogy to tell us that he was clear about his job. It was to make the preparations for the advent of Christ. Once this Messiah arrived, John's job was then to be thrilled and grateful.

Over the next four weeks you and I have got a job to do. We have preparations to make, and our ability to have joy once Jesus arrives is directly dependent on how good a job we've done the next four weeks.

Christmas is not just a holiday that commemorates Jesus' birth. It's not Presidents' Day. It begins with four weeks of high drama called Advent. This is a drama in which the stage of the world begins dark and in need of light. We each take our roles beside John as voices crying out in the darkness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." The light is coming, we claim. Get ready. Don't miss it. As the weeks go by, we light candles on the Advent wreaths at church and at home, and the circle of light builds and builds until Christmas Eve when at last the Christ candle is lit. But this isn't just the reenactment of ancient history. Advent not only remembers the first coming of Christ. It also anticipates his second coming when he will fully establish what he began during his days on earth. So this is our story we are telling. We are the ones who are longing for Christ to come to establish his long-awaited kingdom of peace on earth.

As in the days of John the Baptist, the world is still longing, yearning for that hope. Last Sunday, the Associated Press released a story announcing that the War in Iraq has lasted longer than our country's involvement in WW II. That's remarkable. The fighting in Afghanistan has continued even longer, lasting now over five years. And who can even measure the length of the violence in Palestine? Or the length of violence on our own inner city streets? The end of all this hurt is not in sight for anyone. So it isn't all that difficult for us to take our place in the Christmas pageant as a people yearning for peace on earth.

What about the hurt in your own home, your workplace, or your own soul? Are you prepared to receive peace this Christmas, or have you grown too accustomed to the hurt? Even if you have a great job, and great friends and family, and everything in life seems fine, remember that the peace we find for ourselves is far from the Shalom of the Bible that measures peace only by the justice available for all people. So if everything seems "just fine," then your role in the nativity narratives may be similar to that of the Magi who have to travel a long way to follow the star of hope that hovers over all the earth.

There is a role for everyone in this sacred drama of hope for all the earth. But you have to get ready for your role by learning your lines and rehearsing your actions. That is why the church has Advent worship services, Vespers, Alternative Gift Markets, choral performances, caroling, and Advent workshops. It is all a way getting prepared. You can't just stroll into church on Christmas Eve and say to Jesus, "I've been busy decorating the house and buying presents and trying to manufacture a good holiday." You do that, and you're going to be unprepared to receive the miracle of our hope.

That is why John the Baptist is such an important figure in understanding Christmas. He is the role model for our calling to prepare the way for the Savior whose arrival comes in startling ways. The surprising advent of Christ is revealed in all of our lives. All of this was clear from the day that John the Baptist was born.

John's father was a priest named Zechariah. He and his wife Elizabeth were both "getting on in years" as the text claims. They were good, respectable people whose only regret in life was that God had not answered their prayers of having a child. One day Zechariah was chosen to enter the sanctuary of the Lord, to offer prayers. Whenever a priest did this, the people joined in prayer around the temple. Surely as Zechariah prayed for the people, he smuggled in his own yearning for

a child. But this time, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah saying, “Don’t be afraid, your prayers have been answered. You’re going to have a son.” Zechariah then makes the fascinating response, “How can this be?”

Isn’t that striking? He spent his whole life praying for something. Now he has to pray about this again in the temple. Everyone is praying around the temple. The angel interrupts his prayers to say that God is about to give him what he wants. And Zechariah only responds by saying, “How can this be?”

It is a lot easier to get used to our longing than it is to an answer from God. It isn’t hard just to keep telling yourself that the world and your dreams have always been torn apart so the best we can hope for is that this year we’ll have a really good holiday. But at Advent, we have to at least hear the angel who claims that our prayers for peace have been answered. The next line in the drama is open, which means you have to decide how you will respond to this news. You may, like Zechariah, say, “How can this be?” Or you may join those who went before us in watching for the Christmas gifts Christ ever so slowly brings—the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace on earth. Since Zechariah chose to doubt, he lost his ability to speak. After all, who wants to listen to a priest who doubts that God answers prayer?

When the baby was born, Zechariah and Elizabeth took him to be circumcised on the eighth day as was Jewish custom. They were surrounded by their friends and relatives because it was also the custom at this time that the child would be named. Everyone assumed the child would be called after his father Zechariah, which means “God will remember.” That was the tradition. But Elizabeth who was now speaking for both of them said, “No, his name will be John.” The crowd then looked at the old man and asked, “What do you have to say about this?” Anyone who has ever named a child knows that you put a lot of thought into this. It isn’t an easy thing to do, and you don’t really appreciate the help you get from others. So Zechariah took a tablet and wrote down, “His name is John.”

Now the very next thing that the text tells us is, “And all of them were amazed.” The people were not amazed just because Zechariah didn’t pass his name on to the boy. I believe they were amazed by the name itself—John, which means “God gives grace.” In this birth the generations of longing have been interrupted. We now pass from the era of Zechariah, “God will remember,” to the era of John, “God gives grace.” The days of longing are limited.

Immediately Zechariah’s mouth is opened, and now he uses it, not to lament unanswered prayers, but to praise God. Then everyone began asking, “What will this child become?” “What will happen to a child named ‘God is gracious?’” That is because they took names very seriously, and they knew that with such a name, this child had a destiny. His future was not his own. He existed to prepare the way for grace and to proclaim that their prayers were about to be answered by the Messiah.

It doesn’t really matter what the name is that your parents gave you. From the moment of your baptism, you were given a new identity. That was the moment God proclaimed your new name. Your real name now is “Christ-ian,” one who participates in the very slow unwrapping of

Christ's hope for the world. It is a name that set your true mission in life, that claims God's hand is on you, and it is a name into which you have to grow. There is still time to get it right. So what are you going to do?

O God Emmanuel, who has named us and called us to be your own. Give us a holy impatience in the weeks ahead with anything that will distract us from preparing the way of the Lord. Amen.