

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 6, 2020

ISAIAH 40:1-11 | PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13 | 2 PETER 3:8-15A | MARK 1:1-8

It was like a switch flipped last weekend. For most of November, our neighborhood felt sleepy, dark, and sometimes a little desolate. Streets crowded with afternoon walkers now empty. Houses that were lit up for Halloween now darkened. The once verdant nursery now a pit of gray, more plywood than plants. Not much going on at all. Just the emptiness of mid-November.

Until Friday. On Friday afternoon, cars were loading up Christmas trees next door. By Saturday morning, the creche scenes had risen from the ground overnight like mushrooms. On Sunday afternoon, it seemed like every able-bodied male between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five was stringing up lights on their roof in various states of precariousness.

If you asked anyone buying a tree or setting up a creche or stringing up lights (maybe wait until they're off the roof) what they were doing, they would probably say, "Preparing." "Getting ready." "Setting up."

The season of Advent is a season of preparation. Some of that preparation is aesthetic. Lights on the roof. Wreaths on the doors. Inflatable snowmen on the yard. And it is also a time of spiritual preparation. But that spiritual preparation is a little harder to see.

In today's gospel reading from the very beginning of St. Mark's gospel, we're introduced to John the Baptist. John is the son of a priest who, like many pastors' kids, rejects all of his father's fine liturgical trappings and heads into the wilderness. And he has a very succinct message to anyone who will listen. "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Easy, right? Well, no. Because this requires a different kind of preparation than we're used to. We usually prepare by practicing what's going to happen in the future. When you prepare for an exam, you study the material you think is going to be on the exam. When you prepare for a basketball game, you practice the things you'll have to do during that game. When you prepare for a big meal, you might cook the dishes ahead of time and adjust the recipes. You anticipate what is going to happen so that when the big moment comes, you know what to do. You know how to do the exam's final question. You have a play that breaks down a 3-2 zone. You know the mac and cheese recipe cooks ten minutes longer than the cookbook says it does.

But that doesn't quite work for John's command. Because as soon as John says *Prepare*, he adds something else. *The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.* In other words, when you encounter Jesus, you're going to encounter something very different than what you're encountering here. Jesus is not just John the Baptist 2.0. You're going to be dealing with someone who's categorically different. There's no way to do a trial run or a scrimmage or a practice exam. John's message is basically, *You need to prepare for something but there's no way to tell you what that something is.* Well, great. How are you going to do that?

There's a glimpse of an answer in the setting of today's story: the wilderness. In scripture, the wilderness is a place of danger. In the Exodus story, the Israelites travel through the wilderness and have to depend on God to survive. In Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan, the main character is robbed on a wilderness road. And Jesus himself gets tempted by the devil in, where else, the wilderness.

But the wilderness isn't just a place of danger. You notice that John the Baptist actually chooses to leave the city and go into the wilderness. For John, the wilderness isn't a bug. It's a feature. And it has been for many others, too. About four centuries after Jesus's death and resurrection, there was a movement of believers who left their cities and went off to live in the desert.¹ Some of these people lived in small

¹ Moses the Black, who I talked about one Sunday this summer, was part of this movement back into the wilderness. St. Anthony is usually considered the most important of the desert fathers and mothers.

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communities, some of them lived alone. They lived in a way that echoes the radically simple life of John the Baptist.

And they didn't go in the wilderness simply to get away from people. They went into the wilderness to learn how to see each other clearly. To encounter one another as something other than as consumers or competitors or charges. If, as the artist René Magritte once put it, everything visible hides something else, then going to the wilderness is a way of uncovering what is always present in our lives but is often obscured by our busyness and striving and grasping. Going into the wilderness isn't a way of getting away from the world, but of learning to see the things we find it hardest to pay attention to.

That is the sort of preparation that John is talking about. How do you prepare the way of the Lord? By learning to pay attention more closely. By learning to interrogate, to correct, and readjust your vision. And so it's fitting that St. Mark begins the story of Jesus not in the busy city or the majestic temple or even in pastoral Bethlehem, but in the desolate wilderness. Because if you want to understand what God is doing in Jesus Christ, you need to see what's often hidden. You need to let your eyes adjust to the light.

So what does that actually mean for us? None of us is shipping off into the wilderness anytime soon. And barring some misguided New Year's Resolution, few of us will turn to a diet of locusts and wild honey in the near future. But the lessons of the wilderness are still there.

Because it can be easy for us to see only what we want to see. To create stories about ourselves that always put us in the right and other people in the wrong. To insulate ourselves from the world with money and wealth. To assume that just because something is personally convenient it must be socially responsible. Or my own vice, assuming the world's problems would go away if other people were just more like me.

To prepare the way of the Lord is to clear out some of those old narratives, those tired stories, those antiquated ideas, and to see what lies behind them. What are the things I surround myself with not because they are true, but because they make me feel good? Because welcoming the Word made flesh is far less about making everything perfect for some future date than it is about recognizing its presence among us now. The danger John warns us of is not that we will be half ready when Christ arrives, but that Christ will come and go without us noticing at all.

That preparation is hard. Many of the people who went to see John in the wilderness found it required too much of them. The wilderness brings things to light we'd rather keep under wraps. But for many, even Christ himself and hopefully for us, John's invitation was a gift. A way of reminding us who we really are when everything else falls away. That before I am anything else, I am a child of God. And as long as I know that, as long as that lies at the center of my vision, I am prepared for whatever comes.

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