

PREPARERS OF THE WAY

the Rev. Beth Hoffman Faeth
Minister for Congregational Care & Worship

December 6, 2020

Text: Mark 1:1–8

Here begins the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of our God,
clear a straight path,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “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. I have baptized you with water; but the One to come will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

* * *

I have shared on a number of occasions my deep fondness for Jan Richardson: blessing writer, poet, theologian. Today I offer you one of her Advent poems, “Prepare”:

*Strange how one word
will so hollow you out.
But this word
has been in the wilderness
for months.
Years.*

*This word is what remained
after everything else
was worn away
by sand and stone.
It is what withstood
the glaring of sun by day,
the weeping loneliness of
the moon at night.*

*Now it comes to you
racing out of the wild,
eyes blazing
and waving its arms,
its voice ragged with desert
but piercing and loud
as it speaks itself
again and again:*

Prepare, prepare.

*It may feel like
the word is leveling you,
emptying you
as it asks you
to give up
what you have known.*

*It is impolite
and hardly tame,
but when it falls
upon your lips
you will wonder
at the sweetness,*

*like honey
that finds its way
into the hunger
you had not known
was there.*

Richardson wrote this reflective poem on John the Baptist a decade ago, yet, as I read the words anew this year, I was struck by how timely they are. “It may feel like the word is leveling you, emptying you as it asks you to give up what you have known.” These words seem to be written for a time of pandemic, during which nothing seems as it once was, and we have, indeed, been asked to give up a lot, but particularly difficult is the giving up of the blessing in being together. But this isn’t a poem about what has been lost. It is a poem about what is next, it is an invitation to prepare.

I hope what might provide you a bit of comfort this Advent season is the familiarity of the biblical birth story and the characters within it who create for us both possibility and potential. Later in this season we’ll remember Mary and Joseph, and they will be joined by those who have esteemed places in our nativity scenes. But today is about John the Baptist. And I just have to say . . . he’s my favorite. Each year I welcome him back—grateful for his brazenness and tell-it-like-it-is attitude. John the Baptist is like the eccentric friend you always want at your dinner party. You can count on him showing up in mismatched clothes with unkempt hair, but he’s guaranteed to keep the conversation flowing. He is the one with a personality big enough to fill the whole room and a voice to match, the one who actually says what everyone else is thinking, when no one else is bold enough to speak. Except John. In our Advent drama he bursts into the scene straight from the woods—clothed in a camel-hair shirt, breath pungent with the locusts he had for his last meal and the wild honey still dripping down his beard. John smells of the earth and is certain of his calling. He is a messenger of God, sent to get people ready to receive Jesus. He was a preparer of the way.

Advent is a gift of time. We may feel we have more than enough hours to fill in these days when we are spending our existence mostly out of the way of others, by ourselves, in the sanctuary of the space we inhabit. Yet this gift of time, these weeks before Christmas, are provided to us so that we might not only decorate our homes but more importantly prepare our hearts and our spirit for something yet to come. An Advent practice I have developed over the last few years is a nightly neighborhood walk with my dog, Luna. I walk my dog all year long, sometimes begrudgingly, but rarely at night. During Advent I have found deep meaning in this time of solitude, save my dog’s silly antics and attempts to walk me, as I weave through the neighborhood basking in the lights of the season. This year more and more homes are adding a display of lights, each one unique, some over-the-top, but all providing a beacon to illuminate my path. I try to not take the same way twice, and I wind myself through the streets, zigging this way, zagging that . . . the various routes becoming symbolic of a path not meant to be straight, but, rather like our own life’s journey, one full of twists and turns and unexpected gifts along the way. This nightly Advent walk

centers me in the stillness of the dark and the increasing awareness I have even when I cannot see what is right in front of me. As I open my heart to prayer and deep listening, the crunch of my boots on the pavement become a mantra to remind me of what I have left behind and what God is inviting me to.

If this year has taught us anything, it is that there is not a map for this particular time we are in, this era of illness and racial reckoning, political upheaval and a changing of the guard. Yet in spite of our discontent, here comes John the Baptist, right on time, anointing us with the refreshing water of baptism and charging us to lighten the heavy baggage we carry by offering it to God. And even while people flock to this counter-cultured, bug-eating prophet, John the Baptist is quick to remind us that he is not the one who offers us what we really need. Instead, he is helping us prepare for the transformation that could occur fully when we give ourselves completely to life with the Divine. This Advent, our territory seems all the more uncharted. Yet there is a way that lies beneath the road we continue to travel. Others have traveled ahead of us, providing us with a compass and sustenance for the journey, those things that will help us find our way and equip us to smooth the path for others yet to come. John the Baptist not only encourages us to look ahead, toward the gift of something new, but he is pointing toward a way that can only be discovered by what we give up, what we shed, what we let go.

Our lives are cluttered. Packed into our hearts are resentments, bitterness, anger . . . not to mention apologies left unsaid, fences left to be mended, overwhelming disappointment. Then there is all the stuff that we know we are supposed to do and don't, words we should say but can't, obligations we meant to fulfill but didn't. Having to carry all that with us as we walk along, even in the footsteps of another, makes it difficult to forge ahead. John the Baptist issues us an order we have often found hard to fulfill: Repent. Repent. Repent. It literally means to turn or to return. And so, to make meaning in Advent, we must bolster our courage, lay out all that heart clutter before God, ask for forgiveness and then actually turn around and *let go*. *Let go*. Carve out a brand-new path. Discover the trail of another preparer of the way. The only way repentance works is if we actually do it. And repentance is more than saying *I am sorry*. Repentance is about getting real with who we are and what we've done, and then taking the steps necessary to make things right: right with ourselves; right with others; right with God. Once we have unburdened our load, we are able to stand taller, look around ourselves and appreciate the path that lies ahead of us, yet to be discovered. John the Baptist knew that the only way to experience God in a brand-new way is to release that to which we cling, and, in the unclenching of our fists and our spirits, we will have more energy for that journey that waits for us. Jan Richardson reminds us that only when we give up what we have known can we make room for something new. This is how we prepare.

Last week Don Samuels invited us to take a hard look at ourselves and our Drum Major instincts—that we need to be aware of who we are intentionally or unknowingly pushing out the way to keep our place as leader of the pack and head of the flock. Don, with the influence of Martin Luther King, Jr., helped us to reframe what it means to be a servant, to serve. John the Baptist reminds us that there are those called and sent in order to prepare the way for us, to lead us to something new. We must humble ourselves to follow and to trust that even when our path appears a solitary trail to blaze there are encouragers, messengers, prophets who have prepared the way and created the opportunity to discover what it is we are really looking for. We just need to be courageous enough to take the next step, because we are also preparing the way for someone else.

What path are you traveling this Advent season? What burden can you leave behind in order to make clearer the way and your travel less encumbered? Who has helped to blaze your trail? Trust that even in the wilderness, amidst whatever chaos and uncertainty it holds, God comes to meet us . . . again and again and again . . . and “feeds the hunger we did not even know was there”.

Amen.