

Second Sunday in Advent
Mark 1:1-8
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA
December 7, 2008

Patient Preparation

Did you ever think about how long it takes to paint a bedroom? Actually, not very long. Unless you count deciding what color to paint the room, going to Lowes or Home Depot to buy the paint and other supplies, moving the furniture out of the room, putting down the drop cloths, putting masking tape on all the woodwork – windows, doors, baseboards – filling in the cracks or holes in the walls, or doing whatever else needs to be done to the walls, and getting the rollers, edgers, brushes, paint, ladders, stirrers, spill cloths. Now you are ready to paint.

You can paint a bedroom in about two hours or so – if you don't count the preparation time. It is the preparation that takes time, sometimes testing our patience. The work of preparation is important. Getting ready takes work; it requires we put things in order. How often have you heard it's in the preparation? Taking time to prepare for what is to come takes patience. The Thanksgiving dinner you shared with loved ones last week, took hours of preparation. What does it mean to 'prepare the way of the Lord?' What should we be doing in our lives and what should we be doing in our world to prepare the way of the Lord?

Mark begins his gospel quite simply 'the good news of Jesus Christ'. Mark doesn't begin by telling us about Jesus. He tells his followers to prepare for the arrival of God's good news. He refers to the prophets who proclaimed God in the midst of the world. Mark identifies other people before him who foretold of the one to save the world. Preparation in advance of Jesus' arrival is the heart and soul of Advent; a time of preparation to receive the good news of Jesus Christ.

Mark tells us the good news comes from two prophetic voices, that of Malachi who announces a messenger of God will go 'ahead of you' and the voice of Isaiah, 'prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. These words of hope bring anticipation and a fulfillment of God's salvation. The one who goes ahead, to prepare a smooth road, a messenger of hope is John the Baptist. An out of the ordinary man, one who wanders in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair and eats bugs for lunch. He must have

been a sight to see. People must have thought this guy was out of his mind. But John, sent by God, was the one who preached forgiveness of sins.

John's baptism was a purification rite for repentant sinners, performed in "living water" in accord with Jewish custom. John anticipated and told of a messianic figure who would be greater than himself. He was preparing the world for the coming Messiah; the one who would be called the Son of God, the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John's rite of baptism called for repentance and forgiveness; a call to the people of Judea and the city of Jerusalem to turn from their godless ways and receive the forgiveness that is present in God. John's role is as a servant to the one he is called to serve. John is preparing the people of God for a new beginning, like a new coat of paint on the walls with a fresh start to cover and hide the blemishes of life.

John felt free to speak the truth to the people of his day, using his unique power of expression to call men and women to repentance. He embraced authority and responsibility given to him by God. He did not worry about how he would be accepted by the religious leaders of the day. He obviously didn't care what he looked like or even what his reputation was in the world. He was inspired to employ this innovative idea of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, a life-changing event that proved to be so much more important than routine attendance at temple for his followers. More importantly, he pointed people to the coming of Jesus Christ; one more powerful than himself who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. John was not afraid to move ahead to share what God was doing through him.

Let's consider that we are modern day John the Baptists. We are God's messengers in today's world called to prepare the way of the Lord for others. Each of us is equipped by God to go into the world to announce to others that the Son of God is for all. I am not interested in changing my wardrobe or diet! Each of us is gifted for God's work in unique ways. We don't have to dress or eat differently than the rest of the world. Rather to share ourselves with others, to welcome someone else into our lives, to love one another – that is what God calls us to do; to make the path straight for others to experience Jesus in their life. What if we were to follow the words on the sign board outside, 'the best gift you can give is your time'. What if you were to take the time to be with someone in need? What if you were to come out of your wilderness and enter into the lives of other people? Sure, we may not come from the desert or the wilds of the forest, but each one of

us has had feelings of being ‘out there’ or all alone in a world where life seems to cave in. There isn’t any one of us who has not experienced a life situation that we think God has forgotten us. Or felt alone in the world or desired the companionship of another person. As much as we think we can cover ourselves with a smile, deep down our hearts are longing. Even a fresh coat of paint cannot hide all the imperfections of the wall.

The prophet Isaiah says, ‘make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, the uneven ground shall become level and rough places plain’. We don’t have to bridge the valleys or level the mountains or smooth the rough road. God does these things for us because he is merciful to his chosen people. Isaiah is not calling the Jews of his day to complete a highway building plan; he is announcing the good news that God will make their journey easy. We don’t have to do the heavy lifting, that is the work of Jesus Christ, who is our highway John 14:6 – I am the way the truth and the light. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Your story of Jesus in your life is different than the person next to you. How you experience Gods love for you may help someone else feel loved too. Through grace, you are forgiven and enriched to share with one another. You and I in all of our interactions with other people prepare the way to make known God’s promise of salvation. The valleys, and mountains and rough places of life are made plain in knowing Jesus.

This congregation shares Jesus with others in a variety of ways. Because of what God has given you, this congregation will make Christmas brighter for nearly 100 people you don’t even know through Social Ministry’s Giving Tree. There have been at least five car loads of coats to the Colonial Neighborhood Council. Over seventy-five school age children were able to begin school with needed supplies. You are here in worship this day to share together the life changing experience of the Lord’s Supper in prayer, in song, in fellowship. Maybe you visited with a home bound neighbor or shut-in. Maybe you contributed financially to the needs of those less fortunate.

The promise of God’s love comes to each of us in the form of a simple babe; a child of God to set us free from our sinful ways. God sends you and I into the world to prepare others for this coming birth. We are like John the Baptist moved about the countryside and cities, he spoke to his

community, he baptized for repentance of sins – to prepare others for the coming of Christ. We can do the same if we keep Jesus at the center of our mission projects, youth programs, fellowship events, worship services, church school classes, music programs, evangelism efforts, holiday parties, Bible studies, small groups, etc. With Christ at our core, we don't have to wander around aimlessly. With a unifying vision through our energetic activities, we are people who point others to Jesus by inviting them and helping them to prepare for a life of joy salvation. As we individually prepare during this season of Advent, let us prepare others to know Jesus too.