

## **Hear the Baptist's Cry**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Second Sunday of Advent, Revised Common Lectionary, Year C  
December 6, 2009

Hear the Baptist's cry to prepare the way of the Lord—from the wilderness.

Not from the mall.

We all too readily know how to prepare for the celebration of Christmas, the incarnation of our Lord, the arrival of the infant Jesus in a stable one night over 2,000 years ago. We focus our Advent time, our preparation time, on shopping, baking, cooking, entertaining. We send cards and greetings (preferably ecologically friendly, of course), watch TV specials, decorate our homes inside and out, perhaps set up a nativity scene. We spend this time of hopeful waiting and watching running instead from one thing to another, stressing over any myriad of details (not to mention getting stuck in holiday traffic), as we try to prepare for yet another round of parties, family gatherings, gift exchanges. Throughout it all, as we battle our way through the crowds in stores, in town, and especially in the modern day free-for-all known as the mall parking lot, we try to be mindful that this is supposed to be a season of love and peace and goodwill, and sometimes struggle to find and/or maintain that. You may stop and wonder, as I often do, is this the way to truly prepare for the coming of our Lord?

Hear the Baptist's cry to prepare the way of the Lord—in repentance, with forgiveness.

The gospel story we hear today invites us to make very different preparations for the arrival of our Lord Jesus. For that is what we are to be about in this Advent season—getting ourselves ready for the arrival of our Savior, the arrival of the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace. Isaiah tells us to make our paths straight, to make the ground level and smooth, to clear the way for his

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arrival in our lives. And while Isaiah most likely wrote this in anticipation of the Israel's restoration to its land after a time of exile, it is applicable in the Baptist's time—and our time—as well. And while we need not necessarily drag out the heavy construction equipment and traffic cones, we do need to be aware of the never-ending construction zone of our lives, and our hearts.

To hear the Baptist's cry, we need to get up and journey—to the wilderness.

To the people of John's time, the 'wilderness' was often the desert, but most certainly it was a place outside of the safety of cities and towns, a place where wild animals may roam, where those rejected by society may live. The region around the Jordan River would qualify in many its areas, for most of the cities and towns at that time were either centered around the Sea of Galilee, or west of the Jordan, as is Jerusalem. In some areas near the river, vegetation may have been abundant; water is scarce in Palestine and the Jordan River, even today, remains a large source of potable water. However, it does not seem that there were an abundance of towns along the river banks. To get to the Jordan River, for many, required a bit of a journey—not long, but certainly not just a walk down the block.

And yet, despite the journey, they came to hear the Baptist's preaching and teaching, to be immersed in the Jordan River while repenting of their sins. So long had they waited for the Messiah, so hungry were they for the good news of God's love and mercy, that they came and listened and likely brought others. They stepped outside of their comfort zones, took time away

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from their homes, their shops, their work to make themselves ready for the arrival of their Savior, their God. And those who came risked not only the physical discomforts of their journey, they also risked social ones as well. For John was not a well-respected temple priest or scribe; he was a bit of an outsider, proclaiming a baptism for repentance for the forgiveness of sins, something new. Still they came, swelling in numbers until he caught the attention of the authorities and Herod. But that's a story for another day.

Hear the Baptist's cry to make crooked ways straight, and the rough ways smooth.

In ancient times, a king would send crews ahead of his journey to improve the roads, for his own comfort and safety as well as letting all those around know that someone important was coming. As cities do even today, preparations are made to welcome honored guests, whether it be Olympic athletes or world leaders. John reminds us that we too need to make similar preparations in our lives. If we truly desire God's entry and rule in our hearts, than we are to do the hard work of smoothing out the rough spots in our lives, do the heavy lifting that comes with making the way clear for God. In plain terms, we need to repent, or to translate it literally, turn around and go a new way, God's way. For repentance is more than simply being sorry; it is, as one quote states, 'being sorry enough to quit'.

We modern day types often get squirmy when talk turns to sin and repentance. After all, we'd much rather hear about God's love and acceptance. And truth be told, I'd much rather focus on that myself. But God's love, God's mercy, God's grace, does not come cheap. Our sin,

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humanity's sin, has a cost, one that has been paid for us. If we are to value that, honor that, in our lives, then we need to acknowledge the sin that plagues us, the multiple times a day that we fall short of God's call to us. God's forgiveness is always available to us—but we need to respect it as the generous gift that it is, and ask for it, and not expect it as an entitlement. It is not enough just to have some vague, internal awareness that we've fallen short again; true repentance involves acknowledging our sins to God, and honoring the gift of forgiveness by making the effort to change our life's direction—from one facing away from God to one facing towards God, welcoming God's guidance and will in our lives. It involves making a conscious choice to live God's way, and not our way. It is not easy, this admitting our sin and asking forgiveness, and most of all, starting again. But it is what we have promised to do as baptized persons of Christ. And the God who loves us beyond all measure honors our each and every try as we struggle to rise and walk again after we fall.

And so, as we rush through this time of preparations, remember what it is we are to truly prepare for, and how we are to do so. Take time to step off the treadmill of the commercial and secular holiday season, and wander into the wilderness to hear the voice that calls you to a new life, to a heart that know the peace of God's gift of forgiveness.

Hear the Baptist's cry—and prepare the way of the Lord—in your heart.

Amen.

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