

Sermon: Advent 2. Matthew 3:1-12

*Prepare ye the way of the Lord.*

I've always been fascinated by John The Baptist. Ever since in Sunday school we heard about him being rather exotic - that wild man living in the desert, cousin of Jesus. The story of his birth to Elizabeth coming into play after Mary receives the visit from the Angel asking her if she is willing to become the mother of God.

Young little Mary, betrothed to Joseph, with all the complications this news will create, after remonstrating with Gabriel, says she will do it. But then, she needs some reassurance and she rushes off to visit cousin Elizabeth, who is herself with child, even at her advanced age.

Later, in seminary I learned about the desert Fathers, and Mothers, by the way, who lived austere lives.

Notably Simon the Stylite who lived on top of a pillar for 60 years, praying and fasting. And there were many baptisers, so John might have been just one of them. But John wasn't just one of them. Remember that he was a

serious enough thorn in the side of the murderous Herod Antipas who John had told had gone against God's law by marrying his brother's wife. Her revenge would be to have him beheaded. John was highly significant. As a child it fascinated me that he ate locusts and wild honey. And it worried me that he wore that scratchy camel's hair shirt thing and leather belt against his bare skin. In that desert heat? Didn't it chafe him and hurt him? Later I got it that that was the thing about John. He put himself out there for a greater purpose than his own comfortable life. He could have had a nice middle class life as Zachariah and Elizabeth's son . But instead he chose a far riskier, challenging and sacrificial life. He went out into the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and preparing a way for the coming of the Lord in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah . The thing is, John *personifies* Advent.

He exemplifies the sacred strand of instruction by which God prepared the human race for God's self-revelation in Jesus . St Paul understands this well, as we hear in

today's reading from his letter to the Christians in Rome: "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (Romans 15.4).

And the message of John and Paul is every bit as relevant to us today as we prepare the way for the coming of Christ in our hearts and in our world. I think that is both exciting and consoling, because it means God comes to us in our own particular time and place in history.

Note that in Matthew's gospel "*the voice cried in the wilderness of Judea.*" not to the Emperor or Pilate or Herod or the unjust religious authorities. It comes to the holy prophet way out on the margins in the desert. That's where God is active, that's where God goes. God may well go to the powerful, but he certainly goes to the powerless; he may well go to the rich and famous, but certainly he goes to the poor and unknown; and the small and helpless; He goes to the streets of Havre de Grace, Baltimore, Washington DC, and there changes history. I hear today's Gospel telling us three things :  
First, the Word of God is coming to us, and it is wonderful ,exciting , disturbing and consoling. It's coming to the needy, to us here in the desert. So, are we listening for it, and are we ready to receive it?

Second, the Gospel says we have to repent, and that means changing our lives, which is hard to do. And not just our own lives. but that is what the Word of God tells us to do for Advent: repent, change, stop being unkind and start helping one another and outpouring love and kindness and service. Build bridges improve relationships, reach out to improve our community, even help make a difference to change the world, and make it a better place.

Finally, the Gospel says that we have to prepare the way for Christ. If we have an important guest coming wouldn't we work hard to make things ready?. It's what parishes are meant to do – it's what the church calls Radical Hospitality. Well, our important guest is definitely coming. Jesus is coming and he's coming to stay. So we have work hard and get ready for him!

This week, let's listen actively for the word of God, take it to heart, make our peace with God for how we might do and be better Christians and accept His forgiveness. Above all, let us like John the Baptist, commit to how we are going to prepare the way for the Lord, so that everyone around us, as Isaiah says, will “see the salvation from our God.”

The poet Frederick Breuchner wrote

The child is soon to be born in the night among beasts, surrounded by sweet breath and steaming dung, and nothing is ever the same again. The message of this holiest of seasons is that our God is more surprising than we ever could have imagined. Once we have seen God incarnate in a lowly stable, we can never be entirely sure where God will appear or to what lengths God will go or to what depths God will descend in this wild pursuit of you and me. If God would stoop to the lowliness of a feeding trough, there is nothing in my life or yours that would ever prevent God from breaking into our lives and offering us a fresh start and a new beginning.

Let us be winnowed grains safely gathered into God's granary.  
Hearken to John's voice: Prepare the way of the Lord.”

Amen.