

“How Shall We Prepare?”

Mark 1: 1-8

*Second of Six in the sermon series:
“How Does a Weary World Rejoice?”*

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December 10, 2023

From the Pulpit

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I'd like to begin this morning by offering some background about our Advent worship theme this year.

I believe that it was back in October when Josh and Tim and I sat down together to begin planning for the Advent and Christmas seasons. And, as I recall, it was Josh's idea to frame the title of the sermon series in the form of a question – because a question, of course, invites a response; a question is invitational; a question encourages reflection and introspection and wonder.

And so, the Advent theme that we came up with, as you may know by now, is the following question: *How Does a Weary World Rejoice?*

Now, you'll notice that each Sunday of Advent, our sermon titles are also in the form of a question:

Last week, the title of Rev. Tim's sermon was “How Do You Wake Up in a Weary World?” – and the title of my sermon this morning is “How Shall We Prepare?”

As we contemplate this theme of Advent preparation this morning, I'd like to share a brief reflection that I came across recently, written by the Rev. Michelle Torrigan who is a UCC pastor and writer.

Rev. Torrigan wrote the following Advent prayer:

O God,

I'm swimming in Christmas prep!

The cards aren't ready to send – only half are addressed.

Shopping. Wow! I'm not even close to being finished!

And don't forget about the lunch with coworkers next week –

and dinner with friends the following weekend.

And a couple of other holiday parties in the neighborhood.

I also signed up to volunteer this Thursday and the following Saturday.

Wait... the tree!

The tree isn't even up yet, let alone the lights – and the ornaments!

And the rest of the household Christmas decorations.

Then there's the wrapping – and the cookies – and the caroling.

Not to mention the everyday work around the house and the office.

Stop. And breathe.

In my preparation, I'm forgetting to prepare myself:

to open my heart in new ways – and to be silent and still.

Instead, I keep moving – falling into the busy trap;

Being less intentional, less relational, and more cynical.

Open me, O God, to the freshness of the day:

to the love that is right in front of me –

and the present-ness of this moment. Amen!

I wonder if any of you can relate to Rev. Torrigan's sentiments in this Advent prayer?

I certainly can!

In our household, we still haven't put up a Christmas tree yet! And our shopping is far from done. And those Christmas cookies that I *intend* to bake? Not going to happen this year!

And I'm sure we'll take another family photo this year – but not in time for Christmas.

It will be more like June!

At this time of year, it is *so easy* to get caught in this unhealthy cycle of:

overplanning,

overworking,

overdoing,

overspending,

and overextending ourselves.

Isn't it?

But here's the thing ... on this second Sunday of Advent, when we are already distracted by the commercialism and consumerism of the Christmas holidays, John the baptizer just abruptly shows up, once again, in our lives ... and what does he do?

Well, in the way that *only* John the baptizer can, he stirs the pot – and disrupts the status quo – while proclaiming a countercultural message then – and a *sobering* message – for all of us today.

Our Advent reading this morning – from the first chapter of Mark – doesn't begin with the beloved birth narrative that we find in the beginning chapters of both Matthew and Luke – nor is it a poetic hymn that alludes to Jesus' origin – as in the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

In fact, the story of Jesus' birth is not found in Mark at all. Rather, our Advent reading for today – are these opening eight verses of the Gospel of Mark – the first three of which hearken back to the Hebrew prophecies about *preparing for the Lord*.

But then, the scene shifts to John the baptizer preaching to the people – and preaching to *us* – about repentance and confession!

So, in this short pericope, we encounter these strong themes of preparation and repentance and confession.

Now, *preparation* certainly seems like an Advent theme as we prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ child ... but who wants to focus on repentance and confession during this Advent season? *This season that is often described as the most wonderful time of the year?* Aren't repentance and confession Lenten themes instead?

As I was engaging with our Gospel reading during this past week, the message that emerged for me was pretty clear:

Preparing for Christmas always offers us plenty of meaningful tasks and activities – that keep us busy and occupied and distracted – and maybe even exhausted – as we check off the several items on our lengthy to-do lists. That is true!

But, in our text for today, John the Baptizer – who seems to always have a countercultural message for everything – reminds us all – that preparing for *the coming of the Lord* is also an *interior* experience in which we are called to:

examine our hearts,

and seek reconciliation,

and practice forgiveness,

and extend grace,

and make peace,

and do justice,

and build community,

and bring healing to the world

while we worship and prepare, once again, for the coming of our Lord and Savior.

There's one more significant theme that emerged for me in our Gospel reading – that I do want to mention – and that is – that John didn't go to the people to baptize them; rather, the people sought him out in the wilderness;

they went to him;

they took the initiative.

because **they** were yearning for something more – and something deeper.

It was a bold act of faithfulness on the part of people of God.

And it was what *they did* to prepare the way of the Lord.

And so, I ask you again, “*How shall we prepare?*” How shall we prepare?

And how will you prepare?

I'd like to close this morning with a well-known Advent prayer that I've been meditating on in recent days as a way of preparing my heart for Christmas.

It's from the book, *The Mood of Christmas*, and was written by the late Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, who, as you may know, was a mentor to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Let us pray:

May the sounds of Advent stir a longing in your people, O God.

*Come again to set us free from the dullness of routine –
and the poverty of our imaginations.*

*Break the patterns which bind us to small commitments –
and to the stale answers we have given to questions of no importance.*

Let the Advent trumpet blow,

Let the walls of our defenses crumble,

and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love,

well-lived in the Spirit,

and still given to all who know their need and dare receive it. Amen.

