

“Slow Down, Pay Attention”

Sunday, November 27, 2016

First Sunday of Advent

#1 in series: *AWAITING THE ALREADY*



(Mark 1:1-8, NRSV)

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

The beginning of 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 the Lord, make his paths straight,’***”

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 he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

I have a confession to make this morning: I have received a lot of speeding tickets in my lifetime.

Most often, when the officer asks that fateful question: "*Do you know how fast you were going?*" – I honestly do not know the correct answer.

The problem is that I was usually thinking about any number of things that have nothing to do with driving.

I often think about sermons and newsletter articles while driving down the highway.

I listen to talk radio and get wrapped up in the conversation.

I may even be trying to remember what I need to pick up at the store.

The point is that I was often not paying attention to what is most important at that moment and it takes flashing lights and sirens to get my focus.

My speedy driving was just a symptom of the deeper problem: I was so involved with the world inside my head that I was not focused on the road.

It took flashing lights and a badge to bring me back to reality.

The story of John the Baptist is like those flashing lights in your rearview mirror trying to get you to pay attention, slow down, and change your behavior.

Let us pray...Lord, as we begin our Advent journey today, we welcome your guidance. Throughout this season, be with us and help us find the path you want us to follow as we seek a new and deeper understanding of the miracle of The Nativity. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

The series we begin today is designed to help us rediscover the mystery, wonder, and excitement of the Christmas Story.

We will spend the next four weeks looking at each of the gospels and how they deal with this story in very different ways.

Beginning with Mark, we find the least amount of "*Christmas*" in the story.

Mark doesn't have time to spend on baby showers and birth announcements. //

We live in a world that is mostly of our own making, rather than a world that invites us into spiritual mysteries of faith.

Our world is dominated by deadlines and immediate results, rather than a lifelong commitment to gradual maturity.

We race through a world that seems jaded by cynicism and worry, instead of a world of imagination and infinite possibilities.

No wonder we're not ready for Christmas or Advent – we're too busy living in our self-made world to be ready for God to break into our lives.

Mark wants us to hear John *right about now*.

The Christmas season is so comforting when we read the stories in Matthew, Luke, and even John.

The beautiful starry night on the hillside where sleeping shepherds are greeted by glorious angels singing “*Good news for all!*”

The pastoral images of Luke lull us into warm nostalgia as we remember days before our lives got so complicated.

Mark's urgent message jars us from our reverie.

This may not be the way we want to start the Christmas season, but it is the way we **need** to begin.

We need to slow down and pay attention to the mystery, the complexity, and the wonder of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah says it best: *“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”*

Mark wants us to hear this as: *“Make yourself ready to be the vessel through which God’s love can enter into human history.”*

Mark also quotes Malachi when he says that, *“a messenger will prepare your way.”*

He uses another Greek word that also means *“prepare,”* but the context is slightly different.

Here, the word is about making something ready in anticipation of what will happen **later**.

Mark calls us to 1) make ourselves ready as vessels or homes to receive Jesus and

2) participate sacramentally in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Starting our journey with Mark's gospel drops us into the beginning of Jesus' ministry, if not the beginning of his life.

It fits the way the Bible deals with the life of Jesus.

Even though the other gospels spend some time telling us the sweet Christmas story, the bulk of the gospel is about Jesus' ministry as an adult.

Mark throws us into that story right away.

He gets our attention and then points us to Jesus and what lies ahead.

That is part of the purpose of Advent – to point us toward Jesus and help us to appreciate the miracle of his life, death, *and* resurrection.

The story of Jesus is so much more than just the Christmas story; that is just the beginning.

Each episode anticipates the next and the whole story leads us to why Jesus came here and what he did for all of us.

There are lots of ways we can slow down and pay attention to God in our lives.

One way that we do this in the United Methodist Church is in Holy Communion.

Jesus told his disciples to remember him every time they shared the bread and wine of Communion.

How is that remembrance an essential key to anticipating the arrival of a Jesus who is already here?

To understand that, we must understand the meaning of the Greek word that Jesus uses for this “*remembrance*.”

The word is “*anamnesis*” and it means to recall something with such vividness and clarity that the events of the past come alive in the present, as if they were happening for the first time.

That is what it means for us to believe in the “*real presence*” of Christ among us when we celebrate Holy Communion.

When we break the bread and share the cup, we not only remember what Christ did, but we acknowledge that Christ is doing it again in the present.

This is “*awaiting the already*” as it is practiced in our liturgy.

For me, this understanding makes celebrating Communion on Christmas Eve the perfect climax to our Advent season.

It also makes any opportunity to receive Holy Communion even more important for us as we remember and relive what Christ has done.

“Whenever we gather around the Communion table, we not only observe what Jesus did for us two thousand years ago, we also live out in the present moment the very future God has promised for us and our world.”ⁱ

Preparing for Jesus each Advent is to live out the presence of Christ among us, right here and right now.

To await Jesus is to acknowledge the Jesus who is already in our midst, and to fully live into his life, death, and resurrection.

I get it, this idea of “*awaiting the already*” sounds like word-play, but when we look at the history of the church, we recognize that it is this concept that has led us to develop patterns of worship and sacred spaces that help us experience the past and the future as present realities.

- When we pray together the words of the Lord’s Prayer, our voices join with those who have prayed before us for centuries. Their witness to the power of prayer is alive among us too.
- Whenever we confess our faith through the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed, we testify to the same faith that was proclaimed by our ancestors. The “*communion of saints*” and the “*life everlasting*” are a future promise we claim today.
- When we sing the hymns of the church, including familiar Christmas carols, we hear the same

melodies of countless generations of believers who claimed those promises and turned to this music for hope and comfort.

- When we study the words of Scripture, we can relive the stories of those whose lives were nourished by the ancient texts; we can participate again in the stories that shape our faith.
- And, each year as we journey through the church calendar, particularly during Advent, we are accompanied by those who have traveled this same liturgical journey before us. We pave the way for those who will travel after we have passed by.

I think we must also consider what it means to, “*make straight paths for him.*”

This image does appear in all the gospel narratives and it tells us that the best way to prepare for Jesus is to make a straight path.

We are reminded of “*the straight and narrow*” — the holy and righteous life commonly described in the Bible.

It's a straight line that points to Jesus.

One of the tests often performed with drivers suspected of being under the influence is to ask them to walk a straight line.

Obviously, if the person is guilty, they are unable to complete this task and they go off course.

This is an apt metaphor for what Mark points us toward today.

Research tells us that human beings are incapable of walking a straight line without a focal point.

If you close your eyes, you cannot maintain a straight course.

If you fix your eyes on something ahead of you – a landmark or a building – you can avoid the wayward line.

This is what the gospel teaches us: *If we want to get to Jesus we must stop focusing on ourselves, stop looking at the ground, and stop clouding our vision with things that don't matter.*

We cannot turn around and look at where we've been; we must focus ahead and fix our eyes on Jesus so that our path will remain straight.

We must set our hearts straight and ask God to reveal to us all the things that are wayward in our lives and avoid them.

So, Mark comes to us this morning with no shepherds, no angels, no mention of Mary and Joseph.

There is nothing here we would expect to find in the annual Christmas pageant of cantata.

What we get this morning is a voice crying out in the wilderness: ***“Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”***

It may not sound very much like Christmas, but it sure sounds a lot like Advent.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

ⁱ deVega, Magrey R., *Awaiting the Already*, copyright 2015, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN. Page 23.