

Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Psalm 85:1-2,8-13
Mark 1:1-8

Advent 2B
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St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Ready or Not

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! Both the prophet Isaiah and the prophet John the Baptist cry out *“Prepare! God is coming!”* God is coming. This is the beginning of the good news, this prophetic gospel writer tells us. And the prophet Isaiah speaks words of great comfort. Those prophets spoke thousands of years ago... but what do we say today? How many of us long for God so strongly, so deeply, so passionately that we lose sight of all else, turning all of our attention inward with hearts focused only on preparing a place for the living God to dwell in us?

It seems that no matter what our Advent intentions may be, they are easily lost in the wake of the season’s busy-ness. This is the holiday season for crying out in the moonlight! It’s the most wonderful time of the year! There are lights to string and gifts to buy, trees to decorate and parties to attend! Just when we were starting to get into the holiday spirit, along come those wild and tenacious prophets, yelling *“PREPARE! Make straight a highway in the desert for our God!”* And that’s when we remember... in order to get to the joy of the nativity scene, we need to spend time in this desert John preaches from. No blissful joy of the baby in a manger yet... we have mountains to lay low, valleys to raise up and rough edges to soften. We need to clear away the debris, the prophet tells us – all that stuff that keeps God from coming close. We need to prepare. I don’t know what this sounds like to you, but for me, Advent sounds suspiciously like Lent today.

What does it mean for us to “prepare the way of the Lord?” While the preparing is probably different for different people, surely there is some commonality in all our preparations. We know Advent to be a time of watching and waiting... so watching and waiting are first steps in our preparing. But waiting is not welcome in our culture. “Don’t just stand there, do something!” sounds very different from “Be still. Make a quiet space to listen for God. Watch. Wait.” Waiting is hard, even when our waiting is joyful anticipation. Waiting is even more difficult when we are afraid. When we’re afraid, waiting can feel endless. God can feel absent.

God certainly seemed absent to the exiled people Isaiah preached to. They thought their waiting would never be over. Held captive for 50 long years in a foreign land of foreign gods, the God of Israel didn’t feel much like a powerful presence. And while that particular exile happened thousands of years ago, I wonder... are things really so different now? How much power does the God of Israel have in our culture, or in our world? The gods of money and greed and power

seem to be the gods who reign. As Christians in a very secular culture, it can feel as though we're in exile too. But this is where the watching and waiting and listening become so important. There are prophets crying out everywhere, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear. They come to us in unexpected places, and unexpected ways. They might even look a little like that wild-man John the Baptist, with his honey-soaked beard and smelly camel hair clothes. Prophets then and prophets now cry out *"Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* "There is so much at stake" they seem to be saying. "You need to prepare! You will be transformed, redeemed, totally changed if only you'll say 'yes' to the one who is coming." And there again is our Advent message. We need to be ready. We need to prepare. We need to say "yes."

How will we prepare to say "yes?" Our watching and waiting and listening for God has made a good beginning, but it is only the beginning. As it turns out, preparing a way for the Lord has an awful lot to do with repentance just as it did for those folks in the river Jordan. We reflect on our lives, confess our failings and accept the gracious baptism of repentance that John the Baptizer offered. While John the Baptist evokes the prophets of the ancient Hebrew scriptures and points the people back to the prophets of old, he seems to be telling us that you have to look back before you can go forward. You have to look back, to see what has been, see what you've done, see your part – for good or for ill – before you can move forward. Looking back calls us to repentance. *"Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in YOUR desert a highway for our God."*

The people who flocked to the river Jordan "confessing their sins" could only do that because they'd looked back. That was how they were preparing the way of the Lord. By looking back, confessing their sins, and repenting. And they did it all because they believed the good news of Jesus Christ actually meant new life. It was what they longed for. It's what we long for too, if only we can recognize it. Those people who came to receive the baptism of repentance as a necessary part of preparing to encounter the living God, were letting go of their old stories in order to make room for God's new story.

John the Baptist offers something new, something more, a certain preparation for God coming among us. He offers the baptism of repentance. The baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps our preparation for God's coming among us, for God's kingdom coming, isn't just about watching and waiting. Perhaps our preparation requires watching and waiting with great expectation for that which is to come, and pondering, confessing and repenting of that which has already been. Perhaps our preparation requires our active participation. Like Mary with Gabriel the annunciation angel, we too must say "yes" to God and to God's coming kingdom.

Most of the time, we imagine that the kingdom is not here yet. When we look at the suffering in our world, when we see the destruction of creation, when we witness religious wars and people

killing one another because God belongs to them and them alone, when Advent feels like one giant shopping spree, we wonder when God's kingdom will come. But watch. Wait... God's kingdom has come. That's what Isaiah and John and all of us can proclaim! The kingdom is among us now, and here's why:

The kingdom is here now when we know God's love pouring into us and transforming us. The kingdom is here now when we experience forgiveness after hurting someone deeply or feeling great shame ourselves. The kingdom is here now when we see in creation a beauty so spectacular as to be almost unimaginable, or when we are on our knees, hands outstretched, realizing that we really are taking Jesus into ourselves. The kingdom is here now when we act for justice and compassion in a broken and suffering world. These are just some of the ways of the kingdom of God.

These "kingdom moments" are the gifts and grace of God come among us. Our job is to prepare for them, to take in the love they offer and then to pour that love out in work and word, for the glory of God and for the uplifting of God's people. This too is part of our preparing. When we offer ourselves, when we surrender our lives and our will to God, when we seek to do God's will without being concerned about outcomes, God's kingdom comes among us. And in Advent we are offered the gift of time to prepare our offering. Watching, waiting, confessing, repenting, or shopping, rushing, buying, over-indulging? Whether or not we prepare, God will come. God always comes.

How will we feel if we prepare? And how will we feel if we don't? Is it a matter of salvation, this preparing? Probably not. Still I wonder, what's at stake if we shop rather than pray? What's at stake if we're too busy to become the heralds of good tidings, lifting our voices in strength and justice and tender mercy? What's at stake if we don't offer words of comfort to the ones who are heartsick or broken or abandoned? What's at stake if we don't pay attention? My dears, the Advent word of comfort is not just something we are being invited to hear, or even to speak. It is something we're being called to become, by offering all that we have and all that we are to relieve suffering and resist evil, to make the crooked paths straight and the rough places plain. To prepare the way of the Lord.

As we wander through this tender season of Advent, perhaps we can be about more than the gentle work of waiting and watching. Perhaps we can be God's word of comfort to God's heartbroken and heartsick people. Perhaps we can be the ones who smooth the rough edges, bring down that which has perhaps become too lofty, and raise up that which has perhaps been laid too low. We don't need to be official prophets to do the prophetic work of the kingdom. And besides, it's a good way to prepare to welcome the living God. Amen.

