

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 6, 2009  
Second Sunday of Advent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 40:1-11  
Psalm 126  
Philippians 1:1-11  
Luke 3:1-6

Last week as we began the Advent season you recall that we learned that Advent is a time for preparation, for watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord.

In addition, the Scripture lessons we encounter during Advent call on us to prepare *actively* for Christ's coming in our midst. In the case of our lessons today, the call to actively prepare comes to us from the wilderness, from the voice of one who tells us that our active waiting involves *repentance*.

Every December, when the rest of the world is wrapped in soft, sweet celebration, we are confronted with the bristly and burly character of John the Baptist. John comes to us bearing the Word of God, a word which confronts us and afflicts us by reminding us of the somber truth that *most of our preparations for Christmas do very little to prepare us for Christ*.

And so, as Luke tells it, John calls on us to actively prepare for Christ's coming by repenting. That good biblical word that means to change course, to turn your life in a different direction.

And as Luke tells it, the call to repent begins right where the people are, right in the messy particulars of their history: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Ceaser, when Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee, and Annas and Caiphas were high priests.” Into that history comes John, who says, “repent. Prepare your life for the coming of Christ.”

John’s words today might sound like this: “In the second year of the Presidency of Barack Obama, when Stephen Harper is the Prime Minister of Canada, when Butch Otter sits as Governor of Idaho, when Dave Bieter is mayor of Boise, and when Rowan Williams is Archbishop of Canterbury: *REPENT*. Prepare your life for the coming of Christ.”

Prepare the way for the Lord. Examine your life. Examine your values, priorities, your behavior. Reflect on your emotional, spiritual, and ethical life. Are you headed in the right direction? If not, then turn around. Change the course and direction of your life.

Let me ask you today: How is your health today? Is your blood pressure out of control? Is your cholesterol number through the roof? Are you getting adequate sleep and exercise? If not, then repent. Make some changes.

What about your work life today? Is it balanced? Is your work rewarding, creative, and compassionate? Or is it tedious, overwhelming, and disconnected

from your gifts and the vision you have for your life? If so, then repent. Turn around. Change direction.

How is your family life today? Is it open, honest, and connected? Or is it stressed, brittle, and broken? If so, repent. Turn around. Change direction.

How is your faith today? Is it small, tired, tepid, and dull? Or is your faith vital, growing, and strong? If not, repent. Change direction. Turn your life to a different focus.

I apologize if I've made you uncomfortable this morning. But in this season where we would prefer to remain comfortable, this brusque and burly person John comes to us from the wilderness and tells us that if we want God to come to us, we must get ready. We must *prepare*. We must *change*.

Now at this point I can hear alarm bells going off in some of our heads. Pastor, it almost sounds as if you are preaching a form of works righteousness to us. It almost sounds as if you're telling us that we have to *do* certain things before we can come to God and be accepted by God and receive God's gifts in our lives.

But that seems to contradict the teaching of the Bible. The very message of this season is that God comes to all humanity in the person of Jesus, whether we deserve it or not. The message of Scripture is that God in God's grace treats us according to our need, not according to what we earn or deserve. And one of the

hallmark's of John Wesley's theology was that God's grace is free *to all* and free *in all*.

If God's gift of Jesus is free to all, then how come we have to "do" something to receive it? How come we have to repent in order to be forgiven? How come we must change in order to receive God?

It's a fair question. Let me tell you what I think John the Baptist is doing here with his demands of repentance.

I often tell you that the Christian faith is built on paradox, on truths that must be held in creative tension. And I believe John is revealing one such paradox of the faith when he calls on us to repent.

*God's grace indeed is free to all and free in all. But God's lavish grace makes very little difference unless we are accountable. It is difficult for the unconditional grace of God to find fertile soil in us unless we first uproot the weeds in the wilderness of our hearts and souls.*

John the Baptist does not judge us, and we must not judge each other. But the truth of the Gospel is that we *must* judge ourselves. We must face the truth of who we are if we would claim the hope of who we want to become. We must become accountable for our lives.

When we take responsibility for our lives and become accountable to God and to ourselves, then God's grace fills our lives and he begins to renew us in his

image. *This* is the work of Advent. This is what it means to prepare actively for his coming. [Cf. Susan Andrews, "Wilderness Work," in *Lectionary Homiletics*, 15:1, pp. 6-7]

There is a medieval legend about a man who was decadent and irresponsible all of his life. But he reached a point where he wanted to make a change, to be good.

He visited a costume maker who gave him a costume to wear, complete with a halo wired to his head. As the man walked down the street, he was tempted to resort to his old ways of deceit and manipulation. But he remembered the halo strapped to his head.

So he decided to act differently. He gave some money to a beggar on the street. He treated his wife well. He refused to cut corners at work. He opened his heart to love others instead of using them.

Several months later he returned the costume to the costume maker. As he was leaving the shop, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and what he saw stopped him cold. As he looked at his reflection in that mirror, he noticed a permanent halo glowing above his head. All of those weeks of acting like a different man had helped him to become a different man. By turning around and behaving a different way, he found a permanent new direction for his life.

This, brothers and sisters, is what I believe John is asking of us during this Advent season. John asks us -- yea he calls on us -- to *do* differently so that we

might *be* different people. He calls on us to make a change, to change directions, to alter the course of our lives so that God can do the work he wants to do in our lives.

Making the rough places smooth and leveling off the hills and valleys in our lives is sometimes a difficult task. But wherever we are in that process today, the Good News to us is that at the Table of the Lord we can find grace and strength to help us. For this is the place where we come when we want to wait *actively* for Christ's coming.

So come with faith. Come to the Christ who meets you here. On this the sixth day of December, 2009, at 6110 Northview Street, in the city of Boise, Idaho, in Ada County -- come and prepare your life for his coming. Come and open yourself to the grace that has the power to make every rough place in your life smooth again.

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