

Advent Preparations

There's nothing to put you in the Christmas spirit quite like a good lecture from John the Baptist. "You brood of vipers. Who warned to you flee from the wrath to come?" Just fills me with warm fuzzies and Christmas cheer. The sermon almost writes itself. Of course it doesn't. It is a stretch for Advent, particularly on Gaudete Sunday which is supposed to be about rejoicing. And on top of that lovely intro, his main point is to remind us about baptism, which isn't normally a strong advent theme either, though this year we are lucky enough to have a baptism last week in the 10:30 service and one this week at 8 o'clock.

But as I thought about the text this week, I began to believe that maybe a baptism theme is appropriate for Advent. Baptism is, after all, about preparation. It is about promising to prepare to lead a life reflective of the gospel, one that recognizes that the image of God is among us in the presence of the human beings around us - a life that is worthy of Christ because it bears the marks of his ministry and the fruits of his Spirit.

That is, in the end, what John commands them: You must bear fruit. You cannot rely on your ancestry, your traditions, or your history. This is about you preparing yourself now for the one who is to come. That's his message. And that is what the Advent seasons is all about - so maybe the great ecclesial minds who put together the lectionary didn't completely blow this selection. But what does it mean for us today? How do we take the heart of this harsh and esoteric passage and apply it to our lives? That is a little harder to parse out.

We have to look a little closer at the text. Three times members of the crowd ask John, "What should we do?" That is our question too: If Advent is a time of preparation, what does that mean in practical terms for me and you. John gives the questioners examples of how to act based on their occupations - tax collector, and soldier, and others, like don't collect more than you are owed, and don't extort people for money with violence. Check and check - seems like I am well on my way to Christmas, let Jesus come - pat myself on the back. I'm kidding of course. I know it is not quite that easy.

This is one of those days when the great genius of the lectionary is in the pairing of the texts. For our preparation list, I want us to look at the Philippians reading that goes with this gospel. The author gives us three things we can do to prepare because, as he writes, "the Lord is near." And I fear these won't be quite so easy to accomplish.

Taking them in reverse order, we are told not to worry about anything but rather to lift it to God in prayer with thanksgiving. That is a tall order because the modern world is a worrying world. Anxiety is a pervasive feeling. And I don't mean that flippantly at all. I know how many people struggle with serious anxiety disorders. On top of that, this is an anxious time of year because of the emotional, financial, and time pressures put on us by the season. I don't think for a minute it is easy to put off worrying. But I would put it this way, if worrying is more of a reflexive impulse to us than praying then we should work on changing that. God came into the world to have a more intimate relationship with us, and one of the primary ways we make that happen is through prayer - simply talking to God. One of the most important things we promise in baptism is that we will not forsake the prayers. So hold to that promise. Rather than trying to stop worrying, just start bringing things to God in prayer and see if the worrying doesn't begin to

take care of itself. See if that clears some space that could be suitable for the Christ child to rest in your heart and mind.

The second answer to "what should we do?" is "let your gentleness be known to all." Gentleness is not an attribute that gets much respect in our current culture. And we should change that. Bluster and bravado and outright displays of aggressive manliness seem to be the order of the day. But you can't prepare a place to house the one who is the Prince of Peace like that. I generally try to stay away from gendered mandates, but I will say this: If manliness is at odds with the example of Jesus Christ who came into the world as a helpless baby and made his mark as servant of all, I think I would rather just be godly than manly, and I would humbly invite the men here and anyone raising sons to think about that too. Jesus' gentleness was world-changing and Herod's display of power ultimately was not. Maybe if we were a people known by all for our gentleness we would change our world too, but regardless of that, I am almost certain that we would be more ready to receive Jesus at his advent and know him as one who is a friend and not a stranger.

And finally, what we should do to prepare in Advent is to rejoice. That is what this Gaudete Sunday is about after all. We must know joy. The coming of the messiah, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is Good News after all. That is what the angels will tell the shepherds, "I bring you Good tidings of Great joy." We should live like it. It's said that someone once asked the great atheist and philosopher Frederick Nietzsche why he did not believe in Christianity and he said it was because it didn't seem like the practicing Christians around him believed in it so why should he. He said, just look at them with their dour expressions; they do not look like they believed they have been redeemed from anything. That needs not to be true of us. I want to be clear that I am not just saying, to quote that great sage Bobby McFerrin, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." I know this is a tough time of year for people - facing loss or loneliness that is amplified by the holidays, or simply being seasonally depressed. It's a real thing and I take it seriously. But there is a difference between simple happiness and the joy that allows us to rejoice. If this weren't true we would not have a funeral liturgy that reminds us that even amidst mourning we make our song at the grave "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia." The word for rejoicing here has the same root as blessedness. It means to live with the knowledge that we are blessed. Like we have hope, even amidst our struggles when we are not happy. Because this is the great gift of Christmas that we are preparing in our hearts for - the creating and sustaining God of the universe came into our world as a human being to experience and share in the very ups and downs of normal human life. He knows and he will not let you go and he is coming back for you. In that we can rejoice.

None of this is easy, I know. That's why it takes intentional preparation, and repentance - which means actually amending our lives and turning toward God. That is what we must do to prepare in this holy season. It's John the Baptist's exhortation, it's Paul's encouragement in Philippians. Do the work to prepare yourself for the coming of Jesus among you. Advent is beckoning us to do just that, and it is doing it with a promise rather than a threat. The promise is of the coming embrace of Christ and the gift of life abundant that he brings. That is why we pray, "Stir up your power O Lord, and with great might come among us. And because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever." Amen.