

**Second Sunday of Advent - Year B – December 7, 2014**  
**Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3: 8-15; Mark 1:1-8**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**“Prepare the way of the Lord”...“hastening the coming of the Day of God”**

In our readings on this Second Sunday of Advent we hear, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” At this time of the year we know what preparation is – in the hassle of holiday gift lists, trudging through mountains of mail order catalogues or web sites. We endure endless checkout lines, overspend, overeat, or over party; overextend ourselves addressing greeting cards to persons, many of whom we neglect the rest of the year; and generally wind ourselves up to anxious frazzles!

But we also know a better kind of preparation in the rituals we each have – in putting up the Christmas tree, cooking special foods, opening Advent calendars; in smelling the aroma of an Advent wreath and putting out the crèche, in caroling, and engaging in acts of giving through our church, schools and workplaces.

We know that many things have happened to the Advent/Christmas season over the years, much of which is a bit irritating, to say the least. Harried shoppers, the poor and those for whom this season is a very lonely or sad time, can all testify that this season is sometimes *survived* more than celebrated—especially in times of economic distress. But in spite of the cancerous commercialization of Christmas and the secularization of these holy-days (a.k.a. holidays), some of all this holiday hullabaloo *is* to the glory of God, especially the way this season makes us all more child-like, a little more open. So while it has all seemed to have gotten out of hand, we can still redeem the beautiful, good and truthful elements of this special season.

In the recent tragic deaths of two Black men and the grand jury decisions in both of those situations in Ferguson, Missouri and Staten Island—and in the subsequent social upheaval and turmoil we are facing on our streets—we encounter once again the deep sadness of our historical racial divisions which make for an even more poignant Advent and Christmas this year.

I just can't get furious with what has become of the Advent and Christmas season. As if the child-like spirit of preparation and celebration could somehow be suppressed, our puritan ancestors banned the observance of holy holidays such as Christmas, supposedly because of their sinful frivolity and earthliness. But it is interesting to note that the emergence of Santa Claus (a.k.a. St. Nicholas) as a popular figure came about precisely during the time when the preparation for and celebration of Jesus born in Bethlehem was suppressed. If child-like joy and merrymaking are put down in one form, they pop up in another. St. Nicholas is the patron saint of seafarers and sailors, children and thieves – quite a combination! And also, in a pluralistic society such as ours, it seems to have become necessary to have a set of *secular* symbols and songs for this time of year, for the sake of a common set of symbols, no matter how tasteless or shallow some of them may be. And so, our preparation and celebration can combine the mindful preparing of

the way of the God become human—the Incarnate God in Jesus of Nazareth—with the child-like merriment that is engendered by Christmas trees, St. Nick and the rest.

Now, in our Advent Scriptures, John the Baptist is a figure whom we also meet up with each year, especially in the middle two weeks of Advent, and this is no accident. It is a way of telling us that we all need to wake up, pay attention and prepare *ourselves* to say Yes to God who comes to us in the person of Jesus who lived and died as one of us, the same Jesus who continually seeks to abide with us and enlist us in his ongoing mission of repairing the world. It's a way of telling us that we all need to continue the prophetic herald mission of John, and make straight in our hearts and lives a highway for God, to prepare the way of the Lord and point out the presence of Christ in the world today. Mark adopts and adapts Isaiah's prophetic cry in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight;" and describes John the Messenger's mission, namely to prepare the way, to proclaim a major turn in the course of history. In one final series of events which would fulfill all former expectations and preparations, God was about to appear in a way that God could actually speak to and be heard by humankind—in other words, in human form. The sixth century BC prophet Isaiah's words of consolation, quoted in our first reading, envision preparing a way in the *wilderness* as the *geographic* route which his fellow Judeans would travel home after their exile in Babylon.<sup>i</sup> John the Baptist, on the other hand, called his contemporaries nearly six hundred years later to prepare the way of the Lord and make a right pathway to God—*first, through the wilderness of their own hearts.*<sup>ii</sup> And when we traverse the highways or byways of our interior wilderness, we might find John the Baptist in our pathway, hearing him say, "Prepare the way of the Lord and make a straight—a right—pathway through the windings of sin and the rough ways of selfishness and fear, through the mountains and hills of arrogance or self-righteousness, and the valleys of discouragement and despair—so that God can make a home in your hearts." John's message of conversion calls for a reordering of personal and societal priorities with the understanding that we all share a common humanity and common longing as children of God; and thus, we are to "respect the dignity of every human being."<sup>iii</sup>

Now, also in our Advent readings today there is a marvelous phrase in our reading from the Second Letter of Peter. It's important to note that Peter was intent that his readers understand that each day of our lives is, in effect, at least a preview of and partial realization of, the long-awaited "Day of God." Foretold by the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1-2) that day, that Final Day, will be marked by healings, celebration, as well as by a reckoning between the forces of good and evil. And so Peter asks, "Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the Day of God..."<sup>iv</sup>

"*Hastening* the coming of the Day of God?"—not just waiting for, not just earnestly desiring and preparing, but *hastening?* *Our* hastening the full and final coming of Christ when God will be "all in all"?<sup>v</sup> Doesn't that sound a bit presumptuous? Sure - and yet - if we *can* do that by any just or godly means, then by those means let's do it! Maybe Emily Dickinson was thinking along these lines when she wrote, "Hope inspires the good to reveal itself."

So, here's an example: the Gospels refer to Jesus' many healing miracles as a kind of preview to the great and final manifestation of God's Kingdom. That is not to say that when we find Jesus with a sick person, he's saying to himself, "Oh, an opportunity to 'shine;' an opportunity to preview, realize, and even hasten the Kingdom." No; Jesus simply heals—then and now—out of his compassion. And so, we are called to be his hands and feet and heart in healing, and repairing and restoring his world.

Yes, and the particular gift of healing the way Jesus healed is awesome and wonderful and real—and I've actually witnessed it, and not just on television either! But at the same time, after all these years, I also know that that same gift of miraculous healing has *not* been given to me, no matter how open or not open I've been to receive it.

Now if the Holy Spirit did not give me or most of the rest of us that gift of miraculous healing power, maybe God has given us *something else*, namely, we can pray for God's direct grace, intervention, and peace; we can pray for inner strengths to kick in, for courage and the ability to face each day and each challenge; we can pray for access to the best care that modern medicine can provide; and, beyond that, we can help where needed to organize the support system people and their families may need. And *beyond that*, we can and must also work for healthier lifestyles, a safer, cleaner environment, and for an appropriate accessible and affordable health care system for all. The exact form of such a system I am not qualified to describe in detail, but it would both fully address the issue of lack of access for many, *and* get a handle on costs that are spiraling out of control, affecting everyone. Sure, if you can get your care and are covered at one of our top hospitals, you've got the very best this world can provide. But, if you are poor and/or cannot afford adequate insurance, having insurance but with unrealistic co-pays and other fees—or if you are one along with tens of millions of other Americans who are still without—it becomes clear that we in the wealthiest country in the world—despite spending more on health care per capita than any other nation—with our money-driven medical care, nevertheless, have some of the worst access to adequate and affordable healthcare of all industrialized nations, even with the new health care law in effect.

So, if we can't heal others with a miracle, then we can help in other ways, which God has given us the gifts to do. And *these other ways* are *also* what it means to be agents of God's healing, and also what it means in our time not only to serve the common good, but also to preview and partially realize, and even *hasten* the kingdom of God.

So, with John the Baptist as our guide, we are called to wait in Advent, but not passively—but rather with expectancy and preparation—which is something you do *actively*, as in what you would do to prepare for a child to be born in your own home. This doesn't necessarily hasten the birth, but does have you more ready to receive it. Or as Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke put it. "Be patient and without bitterness, and realize that the least we can do is to make coming into existence no more difficult for Him than the earth does for spring when it wants to come."<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Mark begins his gospel by quoting as a text from Isaiah, what was, in fact, a composite of three texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, namely from Exodus (23:20), Malachi 3:1), and Isaiah (40:3)—which referred respectively to three great events in Israel's salvation history: the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, the Exile

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into Babylon, and the return home from the exile. By drawing all three of these events into one prophetic proclamation at the beginning of his gospel, Mark will affirm Jesus as the one in whom all the hopes of his people are fulfilled. The messenger mentioned in these ancient quotes from Hebrew Scripture Mark associates with John the Baptizer. John is dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt, Mark says—the exact same type of outfit the prophet Elijah had worn 800 years before him. This man John was a messenger—predicted by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah, sent by God—a prophet in the classic mold. Even John's diet of locusts and wild honey reminded his listeners of two traditional symbols of judgment and comfort. Locusts were regarded as instruments of divine judgment because of their fierce and punishing power (see Exodus 10:4; Psalm 105:34; Isaiah 33:4); whereas honey signified peace, plenty and blessed approval (see Exodus 3:8; Deuteronomy 6:3). Paired together, and associated with John the Baptizer, wild honey and locusts signified the dual nature of the gospel: as both announcement of the good news of God-with-us, and denunciation of all that keeps us from receiving God-in-us.

ii ...a wilderness in which God would not just have us survive, but thrive

iii ...as our Baptismal Covenant puts it (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 305). And John is pretty blunt about all this. And here he is in our Advent pathway toward Jesus, so we'd better deal with him and what he is saying to us. John the Baptist makes it clear that we can only say yes to God in Christ coming into our midst by also being able to say a focused no to evil, fear, ignorance and injustice in our hearts and in the wider world. Only then can we prepare the way of the Lord instead of preventing or getting in the way. Advent calls us to prepare for the act of God that strikes down falsehood, selfishness, hopelessness—even death—in the coming of Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom of God and God's Messiah were coming all right, John says, but if you thought it was going to be like some afternoon tea party you'd better think again. You'd better shape up; and don't think your ancestry and religious affiliation and the privilege and prestige that go with that will get you any extra points. You need to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it does, John insists—and get baptized, which for John was a public sign that you were serious about the process of cleaning up your life. No one ever accused John the Baptist of being the life of the party. But if he wasn't fun, he sure was important.

iv 2 Peter 3:11-12

v 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23.

vi Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet - #6, dated December 23, 1903