

Second Sunday in Advent, December 6, 2020
 “Prepare the Way of the Lord” (Mark 1:1-8)

Many years ago before Mapquest and GPS, a pastor was invited to preach at a country church he had never been to before. He had been given directions, but they weren’t very good. During the drive, he became uncertain which road to take since most rural roads were not clearly marked. Stopping to ask directions, someone mistakenly steered him down the wrong road. The drive was a little longer than he expected, but finally he arrived at the little white church just as Sunday School was ending.

The pastor entered the church, greeted some of the people, and made his way to the pulpit, where he delivered a strong and inspiring sermon. People in the congregation weren’t sure what to think, but they listened attentively. When the service concluded, he descended the pulpit, shook hands with the good people, and headed for home.

Meanwhile, there was another small church a few miles away filled with people waiting and wondering what could have happened to the pastor who was scheduled to preach for them. The pastor never suspected that he had preached at the wrong church that morning.

There are times in our lives when we have to admit that things seem out of place, times when things just don’t seem to fit. Advent is one of those times. Everywhere we go we see signs of Christmas: festive decorations, brightly colored lights, carols playing at the mall, Christmas specials on TV, all reminding us of the jolly nature of the holiday. Yet, when we gather for worship on this, the Second Sunday of Advent, we are greeted by an unlikely figure – John the Baptist. Something just doesn’t seem right. It seems we are in the wrong place, or at the very least, John the Baptist has picked the wrong Sunday to be our guest preacher.

His hair is wild and unkempt. His clothes smell of wild animals. His diet consists of honey-covered bugs. And his message reflects a fire burning in his soul, *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*. Somehow, John the Baptist doesn’t fit the Christmas we’ve come to know and love. We have never seen him alongside Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus in our nativity scenes, yet, every year at this time, we are confronted by this strange messenger. Advent is about God breaking into our lives at unexpected times and places.

While it is true that the people of old were awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, they were taken by surprise by John. After all, there had not been a notable prophet in Israel for over 300 years. For three centuries, no word from God. Then at an unexpected time and in an unexpected place, John burst onto the scene quoting from the Hebrew Bible: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*.

As you can imagine, there was great excitement among the people as the news about John the Baptist spread. They had to see and hear this man for themselves, so they traveled out into the desert to find him. Coming out of nowhere, John was an overnight sensation. The people sensed that something wonderful was about to happen and everyone wanted to be a part of it. Could it really be time for the Messiah’s coming? Often when we least expect anything to happen, God breaks into our ordinary lives at unlikely times and places.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with contemporary Christian artist, Chris August. Chris says that age 15 was a big turning point in his life. That was the year he would become a Christian. *I was suckered into going to church by a cute girl in my Spanish class, he says, It just so happened her youth group met at a place that was known for its break dancing. So I arrived that Sunday evening ready to show off and perfect my Usher-live moves, only to find out there would be no break dancing, but instead, a church service for teenagers. The reason for getting me to church wasn't the best, but once I was there I heard the gospel.*

The rest, of course, is history. God touched the heart of a teenager when he was expecting something else. The result was that Chris gave his life to Christ and now, through his music, reaches people with the good news of God's love.

At unlikely times and in unlikely places, God breaks into our lives. From an unlikely figure in an unlikely place, John the Baptist was out in the desert proclaiming that the time had come for God to act. The long-awaited Messiah was coming. The time was at hand.

But that was only part of John's message. In order to prepare for God's gift of salvation, we need to turn our lives around. That was the second theme of John's ministry. He came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John's message was simple and to the point. Change your ways because the Messiah will soon be here. It's time to get ready.

And we're told that the people who came to hear him *did* repent. But what was more amazing, is that they agreed to be baptized. They knew about baptism even though it was not required of them as Jews. But John's message was so compelling that, not only did they repent, but agreed to the baptism he offered.

Repentance isn't a word we use a lot these days. To repent means to turn your life around. It means to turn away from those things that take us away from God. The first step in preparing for the coming of Jesus this Advent is to examine our lives and make a new beginning.

Dora left home and fell into the wrong kind of relationships. She began to misuse the gifts of life. Soon she did not respond to her father's letters because she found it difficult to relate to him. Maggie, Dora's aunt, wrote her a letter that finally melted her heart. At the end of the letter, Maggie wrote: *Dora, you Daddy is grieving you. Come home for your own sake. Come home for your dear Daddy's sake. But, Dora, come home most of all for the dear Lord's sake!* Christmas is a time of coming home. John the Baptist's message was simple: *Repent...turn your life around, change your mind, examine your motives, because the Messiah will soon be here.*

This brings us to the final theme of today's text. Jesus is the reason we celebrate Advent and Christmas. The people who streamed out into the desert to hear John wondered if John, himself, might be the long-awaited Messiah. Adamantly, John said no. John was very clear about his role. *The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me*, John proclaimed. *I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.* John the Baptist was not the Messiah. Instead, he was the forerunner. His aim was not to occupy center stage himself, but to point to the one who was coming soon, the one who would baptize them with the HS. And that's what's at the heart of this season. That's what Advent and Christmas point to: Jesus, Messiah, Son of the living God.

Let me illustrate with a story that communicates the kind of life to which the Babe in the manger calls us. Mike hated Christmas, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it: the frantic running and the blatant materialism. Knowing he felt this way, his wife, Ann, decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, and ties. She searched for something special just for Mike.

The inspiration for Mike's gift came in an unusual way. Their 12-year old son, Kevin, was on the wrestling team at his school. Shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters were dressed in sneakers so ragged that the shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together. They presented a sharp contrast to Kevin's team in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, Ann was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford.

Kevin's team thoroughly defeated the inner city team, taking every weight class. Afterward, Mike shook his head and said to Ann, *I wish just one of them could have won. They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.* Mike loved kids and had coached in several sports. That's when the idea came.

That afternoon, Ann went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner city church. On Christmas Eve, Ann placed an envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what she had done. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas, that year and in succeeding years. Each Christmas, she followed the tradition – one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on.

The envelope became the highlight of their Christmas, the last thing opened on Christmas morning. The children ignored their new toys and waited with wide-eyed anticipation as Mike lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. But the story doesn't end there.

One year they lost Mike to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, Ann was still so wrapped in grief that she barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found her placing an envelope on the tree and, in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of their children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition grew, expanding to their grandchildren standing around the tree with anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope.

And that's it, isn't it? The reason behind Christmas. The God of all creation came into our world in the tiny babe of Bethlehem to show us a better way: a way of peace, joy, love, compassion, and generosity. And all that we do should point to him.

Advent reminds us that God often breaks into our lives in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. At those times we discover that we must change our ways and realign ourselves with Jesus Christ.

In all the hustle, bustle, busyness, and confusion that fills the world during this holy season, let us open our ears to hear clearly the voice of John the Baptist calling out to each one of us: *Prepare the way of the Lord.* And, in the coming weeks, let us not forget that Jesus is the reason why we celebrate Christmas. Let us open our hearts so that the Christ Child might dwell there and inspire all our actions. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.