

Advent II, Year C – December 8, 2024
“Listen for the Voice in the Wilderness”

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ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

S. BURLINGTON, VERMONT

Baruch 5:1-9 | Luke 1:68-79 | Philippians 1:1-3-11 | Luke 3:1-6

As Stewardship season prepared us for Thanksgiving, Advent prepares us for Christmas.

Advent means to “come to” something. We come to that extraordinary time when God came to live among us. At the same time, God comes to us, not as a conquering king, but as a baby in a manger. God will come to us again someday, and so John the Baptist calls on us to get ready. As always with the prophets, there is an urgency. Don’t wait. Do it now!

In today’s Gospel reading, John the Baptist echoes the great prophet Isaiah, who called on the Hebrew people to “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!” From Isaiah Ch. 57: “Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way. For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are *contrite and humble in spirit*, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them.” Anyone who is contrite and humble in spirit will be revived. Anyone who seeks God’s mercy and releases their pride will be healed. This is good news indeed.

John the Baptist urged people to repent and prepare. Repentance (*metanoia* in Greek) means to change one’s mind, to turn around, to reorient oneself. John called on the crowds to turn toward God and away from sin. The scholar Marcus Borg describes repentance as “going

beyond the mind we have,” meaning to look for a different construct, a radically altered way of being. To repent and prepare is to be transformed. Next week's Gospel reading offers more specific guidance on how get ready: examine your life, bear fruit, share what you have, be faithful, be honest, and do what is right.

John got his authority from several places. He was of priestly lineage on both sides of his family (1:5). He was named by the angel Gabriel as having the spirit and power of Elijah (1:17), and he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah (3:4-6). Jesus and John were cousins, but more importantly, they were aligned with God’s spirit. John knew who Jesus was without seeing him. Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, when Mary went to Elizabeth to tell her she was expecting, John signaled his mother Elizabeth at the sound of Mary’s voice. Elizabeth received John’s message, and filled with the Holy Spirit, she announced: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” John’s first encounter with Jesus was a joyful one. Mary’s confirmation was that beautiful song of loving praise, the Magnificat.

John and Jesus did not grow up together, but when John saw Jesus again, he recognized him immediately as the Son of God, and the one who came to baptize in the name of the Holy Spirit.

God’s message to repent and prepare wasn’t sent to Emperor Tiberius in Rome, or Pontius Pilate in Judea, or Herod in Galilee, or to any other political leader. The message did not

come to the high priests either. The Word came to John in the wilderness, the place where God had led God's people to a new land, and a new life.

There are many ways to "come to" God during Advent to embrace a new life.

Traditionally, the church calls on parishioners to examine their lives and go to Confession (which is still in the prayer book, page 447) to begin life anew. If we shoulder burdens of guilt, regret, or shame, Confession can help to heal moral injuries. It's worth pointing out though that Jesus didn't teach his disciples to go to Confession any more than he told them to give up chocolate for Lent. God loves us with abundance. God created us in God's image, out of goodness, and God knows we are unshakeable good, even when we turn away. So, why do we need to repent if God already loves us? Because being in right relationship with God transforms our lives and with new life, we bring hope and joy and peace into the world.

When I arrived in Vermont to start a new life, after twenty years of living in Florida, the mountains were brilliantly green, true to their name, and the roads lined with blue and white wildflowers. I was so caught up in the beauty that my imagination got carried away a bit. Vermont roadsides in summer reminded me of the Swedish countryside and the opening scene in the Sound of Music. Driving down to Vergennes, I passed roads named Pvt. Luke and Pvt. Heather and I thought how beautiful that this community would name its roads after local young men and women who served in the military. When I saw Private South Pasture and Private Butternut, I started to wonder...but you can't blame me for misunderstanding.

When I thought Vermont couldn't get more beautiful, the trees transformed into torches and whole mountainsides seemed to catch fire. A few months later, the curtain fell on summer.

The trees dropped most of their leaves. Bears entered their dens, and birds migrated south, though some remain.

Now in winter, I see God on the white mountain tops and in the creatures who stayed—birds and people. I saw God when I slowed down to avoid hitting murmurations of starlings flying low over the roads. God was present when a puppy ran out into the road, sat down calmly in the middle of my lane, watched me as I slowed down, then jumped in my car to let me return him home. When I seek God in hope and trust God to appear, I sense the Holy Spirit in this world, perhaps in a similar way that John knew Jesus even before they were born.

God is in our relationships with our families, birth and chosen, and God is with us when we are alone. With fewer distractions, we can refuel our spirits with the power that created the green mountains and wildflowers, forests that explode in color, and the mercifully shorter days of our dark, cold, snow-powdered winters.

For the remaining weeks of Advent, let us prepare ourselves by opening our hearts and minds to God's presence in the world and to God's transformational love.