

"Preparing A Space"
Isaiah 40:1-11 Psalm 23 Matthew 3:1-12
December 11, 2022
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Have you ever stopped to think about what it takes to prepare our sanctuary and church building for Advent and Christmas? You come to worship one Sunday in late November and see a thanksgiving motif worship center on the communion table. And the next week, suddenly everything is decorated for Advent, the four Advent candles are in a prominent place in the sanctuary, the tree is up in the narthex, and colored lights are strung on the outside of the building.

I am sure you know that it doesn't just happen, right? It takes a lot of thought and planning. Sharon Rice and Phyllis Stowe are the creative minds behind the beauty you see. David Stowe assists with the labor to make it all happen.

I wonder how many hours they spend thinking about and creating the Advent and Christmas decorations each year? I know it takes a lot of time and energy.

Maybe Sunday mornings throughout the year, they sit in worship, look around the sanctuary, and ponder the color scheme and specific decorations for the next season. However it happens, we are grateful. Their preparation is a big part of our worship during the Sundays of Advent and Christmas. A simple worship center can help us to focus our thoughts and minds as we worship. I don't know about you, but even a few candles, some greens and red ribbons automatically put me in an Advent state of mind.

It takes a lot of work to prepare for Christmas and the preparation is part of our Advent tradition. Christmas is so important that I think we need to put some work into getting ready for it. Some of us may use an Advent devotional. Some use Advent calendars which are getting more and more popular. You can find calendars that hold horse treats, beef jerky, socks, makeup, or beard oil. I looked online and found a Beatles Advent calendar that costs \$250, a Star Wars Lego calendar, and an Advent calendar using Horror movies to count down the days until the birth of sweet, little, baby Jesus.

If you are looking to spend a little more to prepare for this season of peace and love, you can spend \$23,000 for a calendar that contains luxury jewelry.

A mother in England bought an advent calendar with Garfield on the front. Each tiny door opened to reveal green-colored chocolates, only they weren't chocolates. The Garfield calendar was meant for cats and not for her 9-year-old daughter. The wrapped

treats were pieces of catnip. The little girl is just fine. The mother, however, says that she feels like the worst mother ever.

The season of Advent is a season of preparation. Its goal is to allow us time to consider once again, the full significance of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We prepare for something because we aren't ready for it yet. Right? Although I don't think we will ever be totally ready for Jesus, these four weeks of the church year encourage us to take seriously what it means for us to welcome Jesus, first as an infant, and then, at the end of time, as the one who brings God's creation to its fulfillment.

Our guide for Advent this year is Jan Richardson's book, NIGHT VISIONS: SEARCHING THE SHADOWS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS. The first week of Advent called us to ponder, "Darkness." The second week our theme was "Desire." This week we think about what it means to "Prepare a Space." Jan writes,

"For all the generations

that have prepared the way;

for all the unseen hands

that have made ready

every space;

for those who light the fires of welcome

and who tend to every resting place.

O God of every pilgrim,

We bless you with our thanks."

Our texts from both Isaiah and Matthew draw our attention to the horizon from which the Holy One will appear. They also call us to look to the path itself. The prophet Isaiah spoke these words to a despairing and desolate people who had lived in exile for 150 years. Thursday, when I heard the news of Brittany Griner's release from a Russian prison camp, the words of Isaiah came alive for me, calling out, "Comfort, comfort my people. Her penalty is paid."

These words from God spoken through the prophet mark the end of the old age of exile and the beginning of a new day of freedom for God's people. After generations of

terrible silence and suffering, unexpected speech brings hope for new life. God's people living in the prison of exile in Babylon are finally going home! The prophet speaks of a superhighway to be built from Babylon to Jerusalem so that the Jews can travel back home to a glorious, victorious homecoming. It will be a wondrous show of God's power.

The people ended up as prisoners in a foreign country because of their misdeeds and the corruption of their leaders. They chose to ignore the word of God and the needs of other people. This new decree from God will decisively change the history and the destiny of the community. Hope in Advent is not grounded in the possibilities we can see in the human community, but in the faithfulness of God that is not conditioned by human frailty or fickleness.

Isaiah speaks of God coming with might and then in the next verse he describes God as a shepherd who tenderly cares for the sheep. So, the exile shall end, and new life begin, a life where the people are whole, safe, and protected. This is an ecstatic word for a fearful and despairing people. Those who assumed they had no future are suddenly promised not just a future, but comfort and consolation from the God who loves them. For those in our day who live in despair, Advent is the time to hear these promises again.

This text from Isaiah is a bold statement concerning the presence of God in the events of human history. These powerful words are addressed to a people who have lost everything; they have lost all the structures and institutions which gave them their identity: temple, nationhood, and homeland. And now, they find their identity lies in God and God alone.

These words from the prophet Isaiah are so important that we find them quoted several times in the New Testament. They are found in the Gospels as we are introduced to a strange character. This guy is hard to ignore. He lives in the wilderness and preaches the same message over and over, "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven as come near."

Tom Long says this about John the Baptist. *"When Jesus was born, all of human history swung on its hinges, the massive plates of cosmic time shifted under the surface and the Day of God's salvation dawned. As the door to the new era swings open, John the Baptist is the ideal hinge. He is dressed like the old age, but he points to the new. His preaching style is vintage Old Israel; his message paves the way for the New Israel. He appears to have wandered out of some retirement home for old prophets, but he announces the arrival of one who is even greater than the prophets. He baptizes with the water of the ancient Jordan River; he promises the coming of one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire."*

Everything old is about to change. The old is passing away; the new presses in. The long, lost night of hopelessness is coming to an end, and John the Baptist is the rooster who awakens the sleeping world with dawn's excited cry." (1)

Knowing what and how he preached, I am amazed that so many people left their towns and cities, to travel countless miles into the wilderness to hear him rant and rave. He wasn't a comforting preacher. He called 'em like he saw 'em. And he didn't like a lot of what he saw. He told everyone that they needed to stop in their tracks and take a good look at their lives and then they needed to turn back to God.

He saved his most vitriolic speech for the religious leaders. "Snakes," he called them. "Don't think you can pull rank by claiming to be descendants of Abraham. Abraham's descendants are a dime a dozen. Your religious pedigree means nothing. What means something is the way you live your life."

John was very clear that he came to prepare the way. He was the opening act. He was not the one God had promised. The One who was coming was way beyond anything the people could imagine. Maybe part of John's purpose was the shock factor- his clothing, reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah, his unusual diet, and his harsh language were all meant to get people's attention; to pull their hearts and minds back to God. John preaches that things are changing, and God is leading the way.

I find it quite interesting that while only two of the New Testament Gospels open with stories of the birth of Jesus (Matthew and Luke), all four (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) preface the ministry of Jesus with the story of his cousin John.

John preached from his wilderness pulpit the astounding good news that God's dream of peace and restoration was very near, and no one was going to stop it from coming. When he called out, "Repent! for the reign of God is drawing near," he was talking about the presence of Jesus, the One in whom the power of God was made visible. The peace and salvation preached by Isaiah was now a reality. News of this magnitude demanded a response, and that response was to turn away from their old lives and turn toward the new. John called the people then and he calls us now, to welcome this promise from God; to embrace it and live as though it really is true.

For John, repentance wasn't about dwelling on your guilty feelings. It was about God's power to transform us. Repentance is not a one-time experience, but an ongoing re-formation of individuals and communities until we become the body of Christ we are created to be. Turning back to God will also transform our behavior and actions. The reign of God changes everyone and everything. We are invited to participate in that new life.

That new life is named even in the 23rd Psalm when God prepares a dinner table for us in the presence of our enemies. We will feast at the table of abundance with people who, at one time, meant us harm. All of life is transformed.

Both John and Jesus call the people to repent of their collusion with human empires and the exploitation of the defenseless and oppressed- to turn back to faithfulness, justice, and right relationship with God. It looks like we still have work to do.

Tom Long reminds us, "*The Gospel of Matthew connects John the Baptist's claim that 'the kingdom has come near' firmly to Jesus. It is in Jesus that the kingdom has drawn near. In Jesus, what will finally be true in the future for the whole creation is a present reality. Jesus embodied and expressed the peace, love, and mercy that God wills for all people. Jesus took on all that opposes God, even death. His life was the place where God waged the decisive struggle against all the powers of evil, and his resurrection was the sign that the victory of life is won.*" (2)

Knowing all of that, it is a wonder that the season of Advent is only four weeks long. But here we are, only two weeks until Christmas Day.

As we open ourselves to God's guiding in these Advent days, we may discover that the space being prepared for the coming birth lies within our own selves.

- What are you preparing for in these short winter days and long winter nights?
- What is longing to be born in you this Advent season?
- How do we make a way in the wilderness for those seeking to claim the promises of God?

A poem by Jan Richardson.

PREPARE

Strange how one word

will so hollow you out.

But this word

has been in the wilderness for months.

Years.

*This word is what remained
after everything else was worn away by sand and stone.*

*It is what withstood the glaring of sun by day,
the weeping loneliness of the moon at night.*

*Now it comes to you racing out of the wild,
eyes blazing and waving its arms,
its voice ragged with desert but piercing and loud
as it speaks itself again and again.*

PREPARE. PREPARE.

*It may feel like the word is leveling you,
emptying you
as it asks you to give up what you have known.*

It is impolite and hardly tame,

*but when it falls upon your lips
you will wonder at the sweetness,
like honey that finds its way
into the hunger
you had not known was there.*

Amen.

End Notes:

- MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. Pg. 25.
- Pg. 27