

Advent 2B, December 4, 2011
Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2,8-13

St Thomas Episcopal Church
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Ready or Not...

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! Both the prophet Isaiah and the prophet John the Baptist cry out to us “Prepare! God is coming!” **God** is coming.

This is the beginning of the good news, the prophetic gospel writer tells us. And the prophet Isaiah tells us that these are words of great comfort. Those prophets spoke thousands of years ago... but what do we say today? How many of us long for God so strongly, so deeply, so passionately that we lose sight of all else and turn our attention inward so that our hearts might be solely focused on preparing Him room? But this is the holiday season, for crying out in the moonlight! It's the most wonderful time of the year! There are lights to string and gifts to buy, a tree to decorate and parties to attend! Just when we were starting to get into the holiday spirit, along come those wild and tenacious prophets, yelling “PREPARE! Make straight a highway in the desert for our God!”

And then we remember... in order to get to the joy of the nativity scene, we must spend time in this desert John is preaching to us from. No blissful joy of the baby in a manger yet... we have mountains to lay low, valleys to raise up and rough edges to soften. We need to clear away the debris – all that stuff that keeps God from coming close.

Advent today is sounding suspiciously like Lent.

What does it mean for us to “prepare the way of the Lord?” Probably many different things for many different people, but there is some commonality to all of our preparations. We know Advent to be a time of watching and waiting... so watching and waiting are surely ways we are to prepare. But waiting isn't something we typically aspire to in our culture. The admonition “Don't just sit there, do something!” is so much more often heard than is “Sit and make a quiet space so that you can hear the promptings of your heart.” Waiting is hard, particularly when we are afraid – afraid of losing a job, afraid of an impending diagnosis, afraid of the repercussions of speaking truth to power, afraid of what the future will bring. We would rather not wait, especially when the waiting is fearful. Yet over and over and over again, Jesus says to us “be not afraid...” And the prophet Isaiah cries “Comfort O comfort my people...” We know that we need not fear and that God will indeed provide comfort... *if only we hold the truth of God's promises in our hearts as we wait.*

“I am with you always.”

“Therefore I tell you, don’t worry about your life...”

God’s promises are ours for the asking and we can hold them while we wait.

The people to whom the prophet Isaiah was speaking thought that their waiting would never be over. They were a people in exile in Babylon, taken from their beautiful Jerusalem where their temple – God’s own dwelling place – was destroyed. They were a people who had lost everything. In this time and place it was the god’s who won and lost, and the God of Israel seemed to be the loser God this round. For fifty long years Israel was held captive by the ones who worshipped Marduk, a foreign god in a foreign land.

All this was long ago and far away ... but are we really so different? We too can feel like a people lost in a foreign land. Really, how much power does the biblical God have in our culture, or in our world? The gods of money and greed and acquisition seem to be the gods who reign here. We too live in exile from “Jerusalem, our happy home...” But to us, as to ancient Israel, come the prophet’s word of hope... “Comfort O comfort my people.” These words, hope and promise filled, are echoed throughout the Bible from Isaiah all the way down to John the Baptist, the last of the prophets of Israel. Evoking Elijah with his camel hair clothes and honey soaked beard, John quotes his great predecessor Isaiah with his admonition to “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” But John goes beyond the proclamations of his forbears by standing in that very desert as he proclaims his message.

“There is so much at stake” the Baptizer seems to be saying. “You need to prepare! Your life will be transformed, redeemed, totally changed if you are ready to say ‘yes’ to the one who is coming.” And how will we prepare to say “yes?” We begin with repentance just like those folks in the river Jordan... we look upon our lives, confess our failings and accept the gracious baptism of repentance that John the Baptizer brought forth.

And how will we prepare to say “yes?” We begin with repentance just like those folks in the river Jordan...

In work and word, John the Baptist looks back to the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures and points the people back there to the prophets of old. “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in YOUR desert a highway for our God.” This baptizer seems to be saying:

you have to look back before you can move forward...

and in looking back, he calls us to repentance.

That's what all those people were doing in the river Jordan - "confessing their sins" the gospel writer tells us. That was their preparation – looking back, confessing their sins, and repenting because the good news of Jesus Christ is new life ... and that new life was what they longed for. It's what we long for too.

They were letting go of their old stories in order to make room for God's new story.

John the Baptist offers something new, something more, a certain preparation for God coming among us. He offers the baptism of repentance. The baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps our preparation for God's coming among us, for God's kingdom coming, isn't just about watching and waiting. Perhaps our preparation requires watching and waiting with great expectation for that which is to come, and pondering, confessing and repenting of that which has already been.

Perhaps our preparation requires our active participation. Like Mary with Gabriel the annunciation angel, we too must say "yes" to God and to God's coming kingdom.

Most of the time, we imagine that the kingdom is not here yet... when we look at the suffering in our world, when we see the destruction of creation, when we witness religious wars and people killing one another because God belongs to them and them alone, when Advent feels like one giant shopping spree, we wonder when God's kingdom will come.

But watch. Wait... God's kingdom has come.

That's what Isaiah and John and all of us can proclaim!

The kingdom is NOW.

The kingdom is now when we know God's love pouring into us and transforming us. The kingdom is now when we've experienced forgiveness in the face of having caused deep hurt or shame to ourselves or others. The kingdom is now when we see in creation a beauty so spectacular as to be almost unimaginable, or when we are on our knees at the altar rail and realize that we really are taking Jesus into ourselves. The kingdom is now when we say yes to justice and compassion in a broken and suffering world. These gifts are the way of the kingdom of God.

These "kingdom moments" are the gifts and grace of God come among us. Ours is to prepare for them, to take in the love that they offer and then to pour that love out in work and word, for the glory of God and for the uplifting of God's people.

This too is part of our preparing.

When we offer ourselves, when we surrender our lives and our will to God, when we seek to do God's will without being concerned about outcomes, this leads the way to God's kingdom come among us.

And in Advent we are offered the gift of time to prepare our offering.

Watching, waiting, confessing, repenting.

Shopping, rushing, buying, over-indulging.

Whether we prepare or not, God will come. God always comes. How will we feel if we prepare? And how will we feel if we don't? Is it a matter of salvation, this preparing? Probably not. Still I wonder, what's at stake if we shop rather than pray? What's at stake if we're too busy to become the heralds of good tidings, lifting our voices in strength and tender mercy? What's at stake if we don't offer words of comfort to the ones who are heartsick or broken or abandoned?

If we don't prepare and proclaim, if we don't pour our hearts out for God, how will God's kingdom come among us? How will the Word become our own flesh?

As we wander through our own deserts in this tender season of Advent, let us be about the gentle work of waiting and watching; and of smoothing the rough edges, bringing down that which has perhaps become too lofty, and raising up that which has perhaps been laid too low. It will be a good way to prepare, and we will surely be blessed, having made a beautiful pathway to welcome the living God. Amen.