

Sermon for December 10
Pastor Martha Bardwell
Second Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 40: 1-11
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Like many of you, we have been preparing our home for Advent and Christmas. We put up our Christmas tree at home last week—strung up the lights, put up the ornaments. We put out our Nativity set. But I recognize now that something is missing. Someone, is missing, folks. John the Baptist! Any of you have John the Baptist ornaments? Any of you have him present in your Nativity scenes? I don't think so.

John the Baptist shows up every Advent—in fact, we'll get to hear from him again next Sunday—and yet, we still tend to marginalize his voice in our observances and celebrations. I think John causes some cognitive dissonance for us. And it's easier when we sense dissonance to just close up our ears—or turn up the holiday tunes. But John—see, John won't let us just check out into nostalgia. He cries out!-- from the margins, from the wilderness—will we listen to him?

We meet John today right at the opening of Mark's gospel—boom! There he is. There's no birth story, no baby Jesus to snuggle up to. Just this wild man wearing strange clothes, a prophet in line with Isaiah and Elijah, who is calling the world—calling us—to prepare the way of the Lord.

When I think about preparing the way, I am reminded of the first wedding I got to officiate as a pastor. The wedding was for AB and Esther, two of our Liberian members, and the whole experience was a cross-cultural one for me because I'd never been to a Liberian wedding before. At the beginning of the ceremony, a man was up front with me serving as the 'MC' and he introduced the wedding party as they processed up to the front of the church. When it finally came time for the bride to come down the long aisle (this was at a different church—with a long aisle!), the MC waited for white cloth to be rolled out down the aisle. The tradition was for the bride to walk up the aisle with her feet on this beautiful cloth, as a way of honoring her steps. But there wasn't any cloth that day, so after a little pause, the MC said—“OK ladies, This aisle is not fit for our bride. So-you know what to do--get your scarves out and lay them down for her.” Vibrant scarves of every pattern and color came out of purses, out of pews, out of nowhere, it seemed, and they were laid down in the aisle. The one who we'd been waiting for—Esther, the bride—was ready to make her entrance.

“Prepare the way.” John the Baptist says that the one the people have been waiting for—the One who is more powerful than he, the One who will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit, is ready to make his entrance. So we need to get ready and make a way for him. And how is that way to be made? Through a baptism of

repentance, through the confession and forgiveness of sin. Through nothing less than telling the hard, honest truth about all the ways we live separated from God and each other, and through recognizing the God-given freedom we have to change course, to change direction (that's what repentance means: to change the direction of our lives).

That is hard work, you all! But according to John, this is the work of Advent. This is the work of Advent. Just like those Liberian women with those scarves that day—we are called to lay things down before this coming One—this One getting ready to make their entrance. Not by laying down beautiful fine things. But rather—by laying down all that is separating us from God. As the Spiritual goes: “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield, Down by the riverside, and study war no more.” We are called to lay it down, to lay down our sin or the ways we’ve been burdened by the sin of others and the world so that our hearts, our minds, our spirits, our bodies are ready to receive the coming of God in truth and with joy.

What does this look like? In Luke’s gospel, this scene with John the Baptist is fleshed out a little more. The crowds ask John what repentance might look like: “What then should we do?” they say. He gets concrete: John says:

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” (Luke 3:10-14)

Lay down your extra coat. Lay down your excess food. Lay down your profiting from unjust financial dealings. This is how John sees people participating in preparing the way—by embracing a different kind of economics than the dominant culture; an economics defined by loving one’s neighbor as oneself and by non-cooperation with evil systems. This is what repentance looks like.

How might you prepare the way of the Lord this Advent? How might you get to work preparing for that promised day, as we hear in Second Peter, when there is “a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” Just as John was waiting for the entrance of Jesus Christ, we are waiting for Christ’s return, for the day when Christ will come again. It will be a day when “righteousness is at home” here on earth—and in the meantime, as the writer of 2nd Peter states to his early Christian community: we can “strive to be at peace.” We can strive to make righteousness at home in our hearts, in our relationships, in our life together as we wait for God’s righteousness to arrive on earth in full.

I see people every day striving to be at peace, working to make righteousness at home in their bodies, minds, and spirits—I see many of you doing that even when the way, when the ‘how’ isn’t clear.

As I strive to do the Advent work that John the Baptist calls us to, confession and repentance, I find myself leaning in to listen a little more deeply to the voices of people who cry out in the wilderness of our country, who cry out for us to repent and to prepare the way for a future that is full of hope for all people.

One of those voices I've listened to in the last week is a woman named Antonia Alvarez, a local woman who is part of a faith-based organization called Asamblea de Derechos Civiles. She has three children who were protected under DACA, and their lives (along with 800,000 others) now hang in the balance after the DACA program was canceled by the current administration in September. Her children now face an unknown future and are vulnerable to deportation.

Antonia is currently engaged in a 10-day hunger strike in Washington, DC, keeping a vigil of prayer. She is calling on Congressional leaders like John the Baptist from the wilderness—calling on them to recognize the sin of ending this program and jeopardizing the futures of thousands of people, calling them to repent, to change direction on this policy and to prepare the way. To prepare the way to make this country a place where righteousness might actually have a home. This woman is devoting her entire body to this call for repentance; she is herself one in whom righteousness has made a home. She is doing the work of Advent.

Immigration. Climate change. Broken social systems, broken promises, broken families. The issues are huge, and sometimes the prospects look very dim. Sometimes we feel like things are too bleak. We end up becoming disenchanted with God, like the community in Second Peter who, we can sense from the letter, felt like Christ won't ever return so who cares; or we become disenchanted with each other—"the grass withers, the flowers fade." People are inconstant and unfaithful. Why try to change anything, at all? Why not just look the other way and have a merry Christmas, ho ho ho?

We are called to rise above the gravity well of despair. To wake up from the magnetic pull of nostalgia. And to have hope. **For the word of our God will stand for ever.** "Comfort, O comfort, my people!" God cries out through the prophet Isaiah. Our God is not far off. Our God will not leave us alone, but will come to us like a gentle shepherd: enfolding us in her arms, carrying us gathered at her bosom, leading us into a future filled with hope.

This very God comes to us even now, even today, to make a home of righteousness in our bodies. Our God comes here today to feed us, weary flock that we are—to feed us with bread and wine—food of forgiveness of sin. Food that joins us again to God and to each other. Food that gives us strength and courage to do the true work of Advent. So let us prepare the way of the Lord. Let us lay down our burdens down by the Riverside, and strive to be at peace. Amen.