

**Making Room - Matthew 3:1-12**  
Advent 2A

**Slide 1: Happy Advent**

For most of us Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas. And, in today's modern world, Advent is a bit difficult to translate to people. Not ever have I heard of making John the Baptist ornaments for the tree that say "You brood of vipers" on them. That's not exactly what we would think of as very Christmas-y.

And yet, here in the season of blue, the easiest themes we can relate to are waiting, expecting, and preparing for Jesus to come. Except, that as I look at my calendar for the next three weeks, it's packed with Christmas before it even gets here! Where is the time to wait let alone prepare for him?

Right now, I'm nearly to the point of waiting and preparing for it all to be over! There is always so much to do before Christmas: Shopping, wrapping gifts, sending cards, parties, concerts, entertaining,

planning holiday visits and more...add for me and Jim this year planning a trip out to Seattle to visit my Mom and celebrate my nephew's Affirmation of Baptism just as the Christmas services here are over, and it feels like a lot. I'm sure you can relate to your own busy schedules.

**Slide 2: Christmas Decorating**

And, this time of year, many are also preparing for a homecoming; that is, people often go home for Christmas, hence the well-known song "I'll be home for Christmas". But, if that is what is going to be what's happening at your house this year, then that means preparing your house for guests to come and stay. Anticipating a guest always means preparation, making room for them by cleaning and clearing.

Suddenly, that painting job of the downstairs bathroom you might want to do becomes more urgent. The piles of catalogs, books, and dust need to be dealt with, sorted, and put away, if not some of it recycled or thrown

in the garbage. The house needs cleaning, sheets for the guest beds need to be put on...all the things that are done when people prepare for and anticipate an honored guest...we must find time for it all, whether we have the time or not.

Getting the house in shape is a lot of work, and I often dread it, but I also know from experience that when it is done my home will not only look but feel better to me. And, when my home is clean there seems to be more room partly because I have tossed out the useless stuff and put the good stuff where I can find it. But mostly there's more room because I have paid attention to the place and it becomes a place where I am glad to welcome guests.

### **Slide 3: Prepare the Way**

This image of a welcome home leads us directly to John the Baptist who today shouts in Matthew's Gospel: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!'" Essentially,

what John is doing is cleaning house, and he is commanding us to do the same. We are to get our houses in order, for a guest is coming to stay for Christmas. And, what does John teach us while waiting for Jesus Christ to come? We are to live a life of repentance.

When John the Baptist first preached his message, most of his hearers knew what he was talking about. It was the custom in those days for the king to send out a courier ahead of him on his journey. That advance courier or messenger would check out the roads and warn the local people to get to work, smooth out the ruts and patch the potholes, because the king is on his way. John was God's advance man and it was a construction job for the entire world to do together.

Sight unseen, John agreed to be God's messenger, warning everyone who would listen to clean house, to make room and to prepare the way of the Lord. It was an exciting message: That the Lord was coming to be among his people and everyone would

get a chance to see him. It was a message of great joy, that God, our very own God, was about to come and be with us! What could be better news?

#### **Slide 4: Repent**

Except for that fussy word repentance! And, when you add stuff like “You brood of vipers” to the mix, repentance becomes even more difficult to swallow. That word conjures up a different kind of feeling these days, and it can conjure up fear, anxiety, and guilt.

That famous bumper sticker that says, “The Lord is coming, are you ready?” relates to that pointing fingers and responding to God’s redemption with fear and guilt. Repent or else, the common theme from many Christians still seems to cry and as John the Baptist says, “for even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

So, after hearing this Gospel reading for today, this

is my question: If that's what it means to repent - then I wonder where the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God went to. Is this really the Gospel, the Good News? Didn't the angel announce Jesus birth by saying, "Behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy?" Could it be that what started out as a celebration has become a funeral dirge? Is our real discipleship about guilt and how sorry we are being such bad followers of Jesus? I think the answer is no, that isn't the intent of John the Baptist, and that we should be wary of confusing repentance with remorse and shame.

So, let me just be bold here and exclaim that maybe repentance has nothing to do with feeling sorry for yourself. Repentance is not a matter of listing all the things you wish you had not done in your life and feeling badly about them. Repentance is not about wishing you were a better person or keeping track of your faults, as if God might be persuaded to overlook them if only you could convince God

that you are really, really sorry.

Repentance is not about avoiding God's wrath. Nor is repentance an intellectual exercise, in which you calculate the good and bad points and come up with a self-improvement plan. Repentance is not deciding to be nicer, or more generous, although some of those things may happen when we repent of our sin.

Repentance, actually, is quite simple: It's recognizing that you need God instead of replacing God with something else. Repentance is when you come home from a trip to a foreign country where you commonly saw children starving - and the moment you walk through the front door of your home, you realize that how blessed you are and how much they need your Christian love and how you need God to help you;

Repentance is when you wake up in the middle of the night with a pain, or a lump, or a fever, and while you lie there wondering whether it is

something or nothing, your life begins to look different to you. As you lie there wondering whether you have ten days to live or ten thousand, you see that you need God to help you.

Repentance is when you have got your life set - your career established your savings plan begun, your daily routine efficient for maximum comfort and effectiveness and someone else comes into that nice life: an elderly parent, a sick friend, a straying spouse, a child.

All of a sudden everything looks different; one way of life dissolves before your eyes and another takes its place. You realize suddenly that you need God to help you. Repentance is recognizing that you need the saving action of God because you can't do it on your own.

#### **Slide 5: Blank**

I read a story recently about a soldier named Ralph. The man who wrote the story is a university professor who

had been invited to speak at a military base one December. Ralph had been sent to meet the professor at the airport, and after they introduced themselves, they headed toward the baggage claim. All the way down the concourse, the professor said that Ralph kept leaving him to help other people along the way; once to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open, once to lift two toddlers up to where they could see Santa Claus, and again to give directions to someone who was lost.

Each time Ralph came back with a big smile on his face and picked up the conversation where he had left off. The professor couldn't figure it out. He asked: "How is it that you learned to be that way in life, to take the time to notice and help everyone along the way?" "What do you mean?" Ralph asked. "Where did you learn to live like that? "Oh," Ralph said, "during the war, I guess."

Ralph went on to tell about his tour of duty in Vietnam. Ralph's job was to

clear mine fields and he told of how he watched his friends blown up before his eyes. "I learned to live between steps," Ralph said. "I never knew whether the next one would be my last, so I learned how to get everything I could out of that moment in-between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Every step I took, it was a whole new world, and I guess I just realized that I needed God. And that need changed how I am." \*

### **Slide 6: Road Trip**

Repentance is a complete turnaround, a change of course, change of heart and mind and life. Repentance is too busy redeeming the present time to agonize over the past. Repentance spends less time hating the bad than loving the good. Repentance is a matter of being grasped by God, being picked up and put down again so that everything looks different, so that you lose your old bearings and are offered new ones instead. That is God's part in the process, anyhow. Our part is to have

the good sense to say "thank you God, for coming to visit."

And, repentance is not, I think, something that happens once in a while along the way. Life is full of such turning points, large and small every day: moments when we are offered a new way of looking at things, a new direction. They are exciting, liberating, frightening moments which make them easy to discount. After the storm has passed, the fever has gone, the last child has left home, the war is over, it is easy to forget how different everything looked for a while, how changed or how brand new and wide open. Repentance is an everyday occurrence, sometimes missed, sometimes ignored.

### **Slide 7: Making Room**

How good for us then, that the Lord is always on the journey to come and visit us and that we have this time to make room for him – It's time to clean up, John the Baptist announces...Change! Make the path straight for our God to come in! This is less a

message of judgment than an invitation to be lifted up and turned around again to face the one whose name is Love.

Therefore, let us prepare a way for him, make a straight path. Clean the house of your heart, sweep the front steps of your life, understanding even as you do that it is the Holy Spirit of God working in you and in us all, making all things new, creating in us new hearts, preparing in each of us a home that he can call even his very own. Amen.

*"Live Between Steps", by Steven May, from The Story File (2003) \**