



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Advent: Prepare to Change

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 9, 2012

The Second Sunday of Advent

Based on Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6

Today marks the 54th day since the first Christmas merchandise appeared in my neighborhood stores. Only 15 shopping days left now. In the Church's parallel universe, we have barely begun this Advent season of quiet waiting and hoping and preparing.

These readings for our Second Sunday in Advent are about preparing the way: See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me . . . Prepare the way of the Lord . . .

These ancient readings resonate for us because preparing is something we know about. Especially at this time of year, there seems more than ever to prepare. Make your list and check it twice. We have shopping lists, food lists, gift lists, Christmas greeting (or e-greeting) lists. You may be preparing to give or to attend holiday parties, so there are lists of what to serve, and what to wear.

Maybe you are preparing to have houseguests. If you are, good luck and may God bless you.

Parties, houseguests—either one means special preparation: It's time to vacuum behind the sofa, scrub the bathroom, make up the guest bed (or sofa bed, or blow-up mattress, or however we manage this in New York City), wrestle the tree home, untangle the lights from last year, hang fresh greens, cook your signature dish, try baking from your grandmother's recipe.

Here at St. Bart's, we're preparing, too. Church decorations—the first phase—went up yesterday. Our musicians and choirs have been spending hours in rehearsals preparing for Tuesday's Joyous Christmas concert and the Christmas services beyond. Children and youth (and therefore a small army of parents) are spending hours preparing the pageant for 4 p.m. on Christmas Eve. Our staff are working double-time to get the Christmas service bulletins prepared. We're drawing Secret Santa names for our staff Christmas party. Five hundred cookies were baked this morning for today's *Haute Sphere* reception after this service. We had two beautiful weddings here yesterday—you can imagine how much preparation went into each one.

There are other preparations, too, being made that are more poignant for having to be made during this festive time of year. A family prepares to observe its first Christmas without Dad or Mom, without Grandfather or Grandmother. A recently widowed spouse looks for the way forward through the mountains and valleys of stark grief. Friends and family gather at the hospital, or pray from afar, feeling deeply unprepared for what is to come, even as they try to prepare. And some of us would give anything to have the energy to prepare.

Yes, we do know something about preparing . . . in this season, in any season.

These wonderfully specific verses we hear from Luke's gospel today seem to me like an ancient-history version of Google Maps:[hands: wide] In the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberias [hands: zoom in] when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, [zoom] during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of God came to [zoom] JOHN son of Zechariah [zoom] in the wilderness of the region around the Jordan.

Luke is being very clear: This highly particular person, John, and what he is doing out there in the wilderness are fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah, spoken some eight centuries before John came to be: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth . . .*

Isaiah's audience—and John's audience—would have understood these words immediately. This back-breaking work of preparing the way—leveling hills, filling in sunken places, making straight, smooth roads—this was the work of the “advance team” sent out to prepare the way for a king's visit. When the king planned to visit, work crews repaired the roads in advance of his travel, to make them straight, level and smooth for his chariot.

I experienced my version of this when working in the corporate world. If you worked in a branch office and heard that someone from “Corporate” was expected, then suddenly floors were cleaned, walls were painted, offices were de-cluttered, so that everything was in top shape for the executive visit. It works that way, too, in a political campaign. Before the candidate visits, an advance team goes in first to prepare the way.

John is preparing the way for the king—a different kind of king. But before we get too caught up in the baby-in-a-manger sweetness, remember that our Luke reading is paired with the words of another prophet, Malachi. We rarely get readings from the Book of the Prophet Malachi. It's only 55 verses long, and it's the last book in our Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. Because of its position there, some scholars feel it serves as a “bridge” between

the prophecies of the Hebrew prophets and the particular way those prophecies get fulfilled in Jesus, in the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures.

Malachi, speaking three centuries after Isaiah, but still five centuries before John, paints a bracing picture of what that coming of the king will be like: He'll come suddenly, and will be like a refiner's fire, like fullers' soap. Our Bible Study chewed on that some this week ... Refiner's fire refers to heating silver, in this case to an extreme temperature; the pure silver sinks to the bottom, while the impurities float to the top and are skimmed off over and over again. Sounds good, unless you're the one that's being refined. Then not so comfortable.

Fullers' soap sounded to us like some modern detergent. In fact it was an ancient detergent and method of cleaning and thickening wool cloth, a harsh process in which the cloth was beaten and scoured with harsh soap to make the cloth softer and fuller—more than it was when it started out. Again, good result but not a comfortable process for the cloth. At this point the Bible Study group was getting depressed, so I told them to cheer up—Malachi was speaking these words to the priests. It is the clergy who need to be more concerned about the king's coming!

Isaiah, Malachi, John . . . and us. How do we prepare the way for God to visit us? How do we remove the barriers for God/Jesus to enter our hearts and minds as an honored guest, not only in this season of Advent, but again and again through the year?

Here's a surprising thing, tucked away in what John was doing out there in the wilderness of the Jordan: proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The Greek for "repentance" is a combination of the two words for "mind" and "change," meaning "to change one's mind or thinking, after reflection." What if Advent, what if preparing the way for God, means removing whatever barriers there may be to our reflection, and then *being willing to change our thinking, to change our minds?*

I must confess that while I was preparing this sermon this week, I heard the news that the Supreme Court has agreed to hear two cases on same-sex marriage for the first time in history. I thought, "Hmmm . . . my goodness, the Supreme Court seems to be having an Advent moment. Who knows what thinking might change after the Court's particular form of reflection?"

What is it about our thinking that needs changing? Maybe, after reflection, I identify within myself a quickness to judge (in the sense of judgmental, rather than needed critical thinking), a quickness to judge that makes me slower to arrive at compassion. Maybe I think: I'd like to reverse that; I'd rather be quicker to compassion and slower to judgment.

Maybe, after reflection, a man realizes he thinks harshly of his former wife. That way of thinking has hardened his heart. He wants to change his thinking and he does so, perhaps starting in very small ways. Funny thing, he finds his heart beginning to feel more like flesh than flint. What have become habitual ways of thinking (and acting) that may be barriers to welcoming God as a guest into your heart and mind?

Lest it sound like we are doing all this thinking and identifying and changing by ourselves, I think we are not. I believe God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit is at work in this, too. I believe any change we make that moves us more into closer relationship with others or with God is something God (by whatever name we know God) has had a hand in. God works, ultimately, in the direction of connection.

Now about the "after reflection" part of repentance (to change one's thinking, after reflection). After reflection implies we have/find/make some psychic space in which to reflect. What barriers may need to be removed so that we can find that space and time?

Finding space and time for reflection can seem hard to do any time in our ever-busier lives, and especially hard in this over-busy season. Maybe that's why this counter-cultural little season of Advent is here—to remind us: Slow down. Quiet. It's Advent. Take some time to reflect. It could change your thinking. It could change your life.

How is it that you find a bit of space for reflection? What works for each of us may be different. For some of us a week at a monastery or at a retreat house in the desert may be just the thing. (I confess, I'd sign up for that in a minute.) Even if you can't manage a week, how might you find/create a pool of quiet here and there during a busy day? Maybe join a meditation group. Maybe take a quiet walk to work through the park.

Friends of mine who are constituted differently from me will do all they can to avoid almost any pool of quiet, much less a whole week of it. I respect that difference—and remain mystified. All I can say is: Make some time for reflection, in whatever way works for you.

Advent: Eliminate the barriers. Be willing to change your thinking. Because God has always worked, and is still working, ultimately, in the direction of connection.

Isaiah, Malachi, John. Voices crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord. Centuries later, millennia later, God continues to keep God's promise through each of us. Through each of *us*—what a strange and amazing thing! God is continuing to work through each of us so that ALL flesh (all—not just Christians or Episcopalians or people who think like we do, but ALL) shall see the salvation of God.

Amen.

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