



Sermons from

“Prepare the Way of the Lord”

The Rev. Dr. Fairfax F. Fair

December 4, 2011

Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1-8

A lot of people do not like Advent. Their reasons vary. For some, the commercialism of the season brings too much stress. Others feel that society's push to be with family and to be happy runs counter to their actual desires and feelings. Even the church – at times – is implicated. Many people have a distaste for the season of Advent. It gets in the way of the Christmas celebration. Why spend weeks talking about the sun being darkened, the moon not giving its light, a wild-eyed man crying out about getting right with God, and downer topics like repentance and judgment? Bring on the angels and the precious newborn baby! Let's sing all the old favorite carols and skip forward to the eggnog and sugar cookies! The manger scene, with its shepherds and wise men, is out on the mantle; John the Baptist only appears at church!

But timing -- in this season and in much of life – is not ours to dictate. And as much as we wish it were, the new is not yet here. Advent – the root of the word itself is from a Latin word that means “coming,” not “already” – [Advent] is a time for waiting. Seemingly interminable waiting. Something big is about to break forth. The signs are right. The greenery is hung. The candles line the aisles. But night continues to fall earlier and earlier. There is something unsettled in the air around us. Old, predictable patterns do not seem as certain, as trustworthy. Questions swirl with the remaining dry leaves, reminders themselves that sameness is an illusion. With what can we push forward? What can we know with confidence? Which are today's leading nations? Will there ever again be prosperity like some have known in the past?

We wait on many fronts. Will Congress act on payroll taxes? Will the emergency manager law be struck down? Who will be the Republican nominee for President? Will the NBA resume play later this month? Will the University of Michigan football team get a bid to a BCS game?

Questions outnumber answers. We can only wait. We wait for diagnoses. We wait for corporate restructuring. We wait for jobs to open, for houses to sell, for exams and grades and acceptance letters from college and graduate schools. We wait – and if we allow it, we hear a voice from long ago breaking through the cacophony of today and proclaiming a word we need to hear. A voice cries out in the wilderness, and suddenly we find ourselves where we have denied being. We find ourselves in a barren land, faced with a future that cannot be navigated without a guide. We find ourselves without wisdom on how to proceed, but knowing, hoping, trusting, that One who does know the way, One who is the way, will come to us, Emmanuel.

Ann Arbor is a vibrant city. Each year in early August, one can almost feel this town start to simmer as a fresh infusion of 40,000 students begins. Energy pulses into Ann Arbor. It brings fine music, great sports, an active art scene. There is culture here. This is not wilderness! Or are there places in all our lives, no matter where we live, where the underbrush is thick and the horizon is obscured, where we feel alienated or alone, shaken and distraught?

John the baptizer cries out, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" and people from all around the area flock to his side.

"Prepare the way of the Lord!" In the waning days of 2011, do these words sound as crazy coming from the lips of well-dressed cosmopolitans as they do passing over the lips of the first locavore, John, the one who baptizes, the man dressed in scratchy camel's hair and sporting an unkempt beard and overgrown, yellowing, toe nails?

We live in a world where economic structures are crumbling, civil discourse is eroding, and animosity is the leading currency. Even surrounded by civilized people, we need to hear that One is coming who will make all things new, who will set right all that is wrong with our lives and our society, who will transform the wilderness of alienation and brokenness – among nations, among peoples – and will give hope unlike any we have known.

For those who deny any pain in their lives, absorbing the importance of Advent may be difficult. But so is the whole idea of a savior. For those of us who recognize our dependence, scripture's later assurance is comforting. The Lord is not slow in fulfilling his promise but is patient (II Peter 3:9). Advent gives us time – a second, third, fortieth opportunity -- to prepare for the Lord's coming, time to turn from a dead end road and toward the light; time to turn from nothingness to life. Making us aware of this task is the role of the prophet – not himself to turn us but to ready us for the turn, to till the soil, to open the windows and let out the staleness, to get rid of the old idols that never were efficacious for more than gathering dust and to create space for One who ushers in a new era, a new reign, one which will never end. Oh, how we need the coming Lord!

Advent waiting is not like other waiting, not like sitting – hours on end – in a hospital room, not like waiting for seconds to tick off a scoreboard, not like waiting for a baby to sprout a first tooth or for floodwaters to recede. Rather than passivity, Advent waiting inspires action. And the initial step is the adoption of an attitude of humility.

At first glance, today's New Testament passage might seem to be about John the Baptist. But John's role is not to be the star; he is to point to the One of great importance. John openly acknowledges that he cannot offer what the coming One will, that the coming One's greatness renders John unworthy even to be his servant. In a culture that strives to build self-esteem, in a country where many parents seek to be a friend to their children rather than a limit-setter, humility gets short shrift. So does history.

The Gospel of Mark does not begin with a story of Jesus' birth. It contains no annunciation accounts, not losing cattle, not even a flight into Egypt. Mark's Gospel begins with ancient words of faith, words taken from the writings of the prophets Malachi and Isaiah.

The One who is to come does not spring forth from out of nowhere. His coming has been prophesied. He continues what God has begun generations before. The past is not disregarded when the new comes. The new builds on the old, manifesting God's loving providence down through the ages.

This is a time of unrest in our denomination, in our country, and in the world. In every sphere, many advocate new beginnings. Wipe clean the slate! Begin anew! We see it in the Presbyterian Church in movements like The Fellowship, which espouses starting a new church from scratch, denying our connections to one another, connections not forged by human agreements and documents but sealed in the waters of baptism. We see it in political rhetoric which pretends we can solve deep economic problems by wiping out past actions, going back on promises, looking the other way and letting millions of our neighbors go hungry and without medical care, shelter, or heat. We see it in the world where leaders act as if leaving a battlefield will heal the wounds of war. We see it in nations where citizens have taken to the streets to overthrow governments.

In this season of Advent when we await God's doing a new thing, do not think that God is tossing aside the history that began with Abraham. Do not place on a lower rung the books of the Old Testament, the stories of our Hebrew ancestors in the faith and the writings of the prophets. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, comes in the continuum begun before the worlds were created. God is one. God is Creator of all that is. God's coming among us as flesh and blood is not an abdication of a former way of being divine. Nor is it disdain for a former people. God's coming among us in Jesus Christ is the next step of God's plan, a step made necessary by our weakness, a step which will culminate in God's coming again in greatness, an event for which we must prepare and which we anticipate in the season of Advent. Advent is both the remembrance of God's coming in the child we call Jesus and the anticipation of God's coming again in glory. It is God's goodness shining forth that calls us to get ready. This same kind of long memory must guide all our decisions and actions.

Friends, the season of Advent is an opportunity. It is a call to attention. It is a rallying cry, sounding forth into the wilderness of our lives. It is not so much a warning as a shout that precedes joy, that brings hope, that humbles us and lifts us up.

Prepare the way of the Lord. In awe. In wonder. In the company of one another.

To God be all glory, honor, and praise, world with end. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation. Copyright ©2011 by Fairfax F. Fair. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.