

Advent 2B11

Mark 1: 1-8

Do you have anything special that you do to mark the days of Advent? I have an Advent Calendar that helps me mark the days, albeit the days beginning Dec.1 and not from the very first day of the season. Still, opening a window every day and seeing a picture of a star or a sheep takes my mind off of the ads on TV reminding me that I only have 21 days left till Christmas and on to the meaning of the season. When I was little, my family had its own Advent Wreath that sat in the middle of the dining room table. We would light the candle for each Sunday in Advent, but then relight that candle or candles every time we sat down to dinner throughout the season.

Now, I don't know if you have either of these things in your home, but I'm betting that you have one thing – and if it isn't there yet, it will be at some point, if only making an appearance on Christmas Eve. We have one right here in the Chancel, and we have an even bigger one at the front of the church: a crèche, or Nativity scene. Do you have one up at home yet? I do. It's one that I've had since I was about 5 or 6. Baby Jesus is not yet in the manger, but everyone else is there.

There is one person, though, who isn't there, but maybe should be off in the distance. If I were building a putz (explain what it is) this year, I might even do that since the scene is so wide in space. Who do you think I would add? I'd add a figure representing the favorite, most powerful activist preacher of his day, John the Baptizer. And I'd add him because his message declared that nothing less than a radical change in history was about to take place.

Every year, on the first or second Sunday of Advent we encounter this man; he comes back in our faces again challenging us to meet him in the wilderness and to listen for the story of Christmas, of our very faith to begin. This irritating, eccentric cousin of Jesus has a message that time will never be able to turn off: repent and prepare the way of the Lord. The Greek word used here for repent doesn't mean feeling sorry for sins committed, but rather means “to change one's mind,” but, behind it lies the Hebrew verb, “to turn around,” that is to change one's heart, will and conduct” and go in a new direction. (1) Turn around and prepare the way of the Lord.

No wonder John was so adamant. He had to bring the message home to anyone and everyone within earshot because the one to whom he pointed, the one he was to prepare the way for was coming soon. It was a mandate from heaven itself – repent, turn back to God and be baptized as a sign of

receiving God's forgiveness and be sealed by God into the new life that was offered.

The people who came out to meet John were desperate. They heard the familiar words that Isaiah had spoken to the Jewish people in exile and it touched them like nothing had for years because, they, too, found themselves in a kind of exile. "Oh, they still lived at home, but they were spiritually and physically captive. They were captive to the mighty armies of Rome and were little more than slaves in their own land. The tenuous peace was preserved by the agreements between their religious leaders and the various Roman governors. Many had lost the hope that had kept their faith alive for generations: the hope that God's messiah would come to them." (2) They were ready to be shaken up; they wanted to be turned around, or at least pointed in the right direction. They met John because they were ready to give hope one more try. How about you?

What do we anticipate this Advent? We may anticipate the same old story, the story we've heard for years, but then we need to remember that the context of our lives is always changing. The words may be the same, but what we do with them will present us with a new challenge. You don't have to trade in your winter fleece for a camel hair sweater or dump your Chex Mix for locusts and honey. But Advent is a time for us to join the Baptizer and prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and in our world today.

One of my favorite authors is Sue Monk Kidd. In her book When the Heart Waits, she recalled how one day, as December approached, she sat by the wooden nativity set clustered under their Christmas tree and thought over the last year of her life. She remembered once visiting a monastery around Christmas. As she passed a monk walking outside the church, she greeted him with 'Merry Christmas.' The monk's response caught her off guard a bit. 'May Christ be born in you,' he replied. His words seemed strange and peculiar at the time. What did he mean, 'May Christ be born in you?' At the time she was unsure of what he meant, but now all these years later, sitting beside the Christmas tree, she felt the impact of his words. She discovered that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation and spiritual transformation. It is 'realizing more of our inner Christ-nature; it is discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart.' (3)

Listen again and anew for the voice of John this Advent: repent, turn around, and be transformed. As the Shaker song reminds us, "Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to come down where you ought to be. And when we find ourselves in the place just right, twill be in the valley of love and delight. When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn, will be our delight, till by turning, turning,

we come round right.” May you have a blessed Advent season and may Christ be born in you. Amen.

1. Mark by Hare, WBC
2. Rev. Beth Johnston, 12/5/2005; web site
3. Sue Monk Kidd, When the Heart Waits, p.181