

Advent 2: Preparing the Way

Ruth Haley Barton

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness...He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, as it is written in the words of Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Luke 3:1-6 and 7-18

Second and Third Sundays of Advent

On a recent trip to Vancouver I noticed that there was evidence of much construction going on in this beautiful city. When I asked about it, the locals told me that a lot of the construction was in preparation for the coming of the Olympic Games in 2010. There were cranes in place for building new hotels and accommodations for guests. There was a new transportation system being put in place to accommodate the onslaught of visitors. There were athletic arenas being built to accommodate the competitions themselves. In everyone I talked to there was a sense of pride and anticipation about the honor of hosting this great global event. It was hard work, yes, but it was worth the effort to get ready for what was to come.

This kind of anticipation and preparation is another one of the great themes of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting, yes, but it waiting with a purpose. There is something we are to *do* during our waiting; we are to do whatever we need to do to prepare our souls to welcome Christ deeper into the recesses of our life and being.

The passages for the second and third Sundays of Advent (Luke 3:1-6 and Luke 3:7-18 respectively) are very closely connected thematically. They give us a bold snapshot of John the Baptist's prophetic ministry of preparing the way for the coming of Christ. The words of Isaiah captured his mission: *Every valley shall be filled, and every*

mountain and hill made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (vv. 5, 6)

It is a construction metaphor that represents our determined effort to do whatever it takes to ease our Lord’s arrival. The imagery of paths being made straight, valleys being filled, and hills being made low speaks of the necessary work of preparation. And imbedded in this account of John’s familiar proclamation is an unsettling message for us as spiritual leaders.

Lest we rush too quickly to the oft-quoted verses that we are most familiar with, theologian and author John Shea points out that the opening sentence of Luke 3 is “a scathing theological judgment on the Roman and Jewish political leaders and the religious establishment. The Word of God bypassed them all...the Word of the Lord does not stop in palaces or temple. Instead it searches out a priest’s son who is also a prophet and finds him in the desert. The desert is a place of purification and inner scrutiny, far from the machinations of power.”¹

This is a sobering observation for those of us who are leaders in the establishment—religious or political. We long for Christ to come into our world with the humility of a child, yes, but also in the power and majesty of a king who knows what to do for his people. This passage points to the fact that perhaps what is more significant than the pageantry and profundity of our church services is the hard and sometimes dirty work of its leaders allowing God to make us aware of that within us which is a blockage or an impediment to Christ’s coming. More significant than our ability to wax eloquent about the Gospel is our willingness to repent as specifically as we can and enter into the waters of baptism meant for the cleansing of our souls.

But John doesn't just speak in general terms about repentance. He takes it a step farther and says that we are to *bear fruits worthy of repentance*. Repentance is more than just feeling badly about our sins in a private sort of way. There are fruits associated with repentance that should be evident to others in the very way that we live. When John said this, the people gathered to listen. They questioned him about what repentance meant for them specifically. Rich people. Tax collectors. Soldiers. It was a brave question but they really wanted to know.

And then John spoke to them in profoundly practical ways about what repentance is and the fruits that must accompany our repentance if it is to be real. If we have two coats (a sign of affluence and material wealth), repentance involves sharing what we have. If we deal in the realm of other people's money and finances, we need to become more honest and fair. If we are a soldier or a public servant representing our government and keeping the peace, we are to use our position for the good of others. We are to be satisfied with what we have rather than using our position to get more for ourselves.

This passage causes me to wonder about the religious leaders standing in the crowd that day. Was there anyone willing to push past their embarrassment about what they didn't know and ask "What does repentance look like for me?" What would John say to us as Christian leaders about repentance?

Certainly not a man to mince words, I wonder if he would say, "Preparing the way of the Lord begins with you. As you prepare the way for the Lord's coming in your church or community, don't worry so much about your preaching, your programming and your pageantry. What is most important is the process and the fruit of your own repentance. Work hard to remove the blockages and hindrances to Christ's coming. Be very determined in making straight that which is crooked *in you* and smooth out that

which is rough. Do whatever is in your power to ease the way for Christ's coming—for yourself and for the people you serve. *That is spiritual leadership.*”

The Farther Ahead I am, the Farther Behind I Get

Sometimes it seems like the further along we get in ministry, the harder it is to repent and to confess our sins to God and to each other. So often, we are quick to blame others for why Christ has not come with power and glory into our lives as individuals or in the life that we share together. This portion of the Advent season forces us to keep our faces turned towards the mirror to ask *What is the rough place or the crooked place in me that keeps Christ from coming more fully into the arenas where I have oversight and influence?*

We live in a culture that promotes a profound sense of denial—especially among leaders—about the presence of sin in our lives and the way in which our sins and negative patterns wound others. In our litigious milieu, even when something is our fault, we are encouraged not to admit it unless we can derive some benefit from it. We are, in fact, encouraged to twist facts or misuse language in such a way that the spotlight of blame can be focused somewhere else. We use all sorts of different means—ranging from flat-out denial to subtle mis-use of language—to avoid having to truly repent.

I recall a church elder who dealt with a parishioner in a way that was mean and even slanderous. When confronted with such blatantly bad behavior, the best this elder could do was to acknowledge that her communication was “less than artful.” Such a weak admission showed little capacity for true self-awareness, self-examination, and repentance. How healing it would have been if she could have acknowledged how her behavior had wounded another, reflected a bit about what was happening inside her that

caused her to make such cutting remarks, offered a sincere apology and asked for forgiveness.

This is the fruit of true repentance that John the Baptist is talking about and it begins with us as leaders. *This* is how we prepare the way for the Lord so that when the day of his coming appears, we are ready to receive him into the deepest places of our being. *This* is the most important work we can do to prepare for that day in our own personal lives and in our lives together as the Church gathers. But there is real work involved. And so we pray together.

*Abba, dear Father,
Help us to watch and pray eagerly
for the coming of our blessed Savior.
When he stands at the door and knocks,
May he not find us sleeping in our sins
but awake and expecting his return
as faithful servants and friends.
We ask this through the same Christ our Lord.
~Amen²*

¹ John Shea, S.T.D., *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2006), p. 5.

² William Storey, *A Seasonal Book of Hours*, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), p.8.

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