

Advent 2: Necessary Preparations

Ruth Haley Barton

“The word of God came to John in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of Isaiah, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” ~from Luke 3:1-6

Recently I started writing a new book which is always a daunting thing. As I settled into writing mode, I realized that there was some work I needed to do *before* I could even begin this project—the work of preparation. Some of the work had to do with the externals of life in time and space. I needed to think through how I would protect the time for accomplishing this project. I needed to rearrange my calendar, and start saying “no” more to the various kinds of requests that come in. I needed to clear away the clutter of old files and paperwork that had accumulated during a very busy travel season.

But some of the preparation was also internal. I needed to complete some smaller writing projects first so they were not taking up brain space. I needed to reacquaint myself with the proposal I had written so long ago and re-engage the resources related to the theme of the book. I needed to enter into a different set of rhythms that would foster the quieter and more receptive stance necessary for me to “receive” a new book. I needed to be with God with the fear and anxiety I always feel when I start a new project so that these inner dynamics did not become hidden obstacles to the work that was ahead. I needed to hear God speak to me once again about the vision for the book that had caused me to agree to write it in the first place. It was clear to me that the necessary work of preparation was the only way would I be ready to welcome the coming of this new book.

Preparing the Way

There is something about this experience that speaks to me in very concrete terms about the idea of preparation—one of the great themes of Advent. Advent is a season of waiting, yes, but it is waiting with a very deep kind of intentionality and openness to receive.¹ There is something for us to *do* in our waiting; we are to do those things that prepare our souls to welcome Christ deeper into the recesses of our life and being.

In the Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Advent (Luke 3:1-6), John the Baptist says that the first thing we are to do to prepare the way of the Lord is to repent. But what does that have to do with Advent? The word repent is a translation of the Greek word *metanoia* which literally means to turn around, to change the mind and even to “go beyond the mind” with all of its deeply patterned responses. “When we are able to go beyond the mind, forgiveness of sins follows. This is an enigmatic connection. It assumes there is something about the mind that holds onto sins; and there something about going beyond the mind that lets go of sins...this is the necessary work of preparation.”² What John is saying is that there is some change that needs to take place *in me* to ease the Lord’s coming.

The words of Isaiah capture the how of all this in a construction metaphor: *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) The imagery of a winding path being made straight so as not to be a hindrance, a low place being filled in to make the way smoother, and a mountain being flattened so as to not obstruct progress, speaks of the necessary work of preparation. And

it is work! This is our determined effort to do *whatever it takes* to ease our Lord's arrival.

God's Word to Leaders

Imbedded in this account of John's familiar proclamation is an unsettling message for us as spiritual leaders. Theologian and author John Shea contextualizes John the Baptist's message by pointing 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."³

What this passage says to me is that perhaps what is more significant than the pageantry and profundity of our church services this season is the hard and sometimes dirty work of repentance—allowing God to make us aware of what it is within us *as leaders* which is a blockage or an impediment to Christ's coming in the community that we are leading. More significant than our ability to wax eloquent about the Gospel is our willingness to enter into the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is the Scripture's way of talking about our ongoing process of conversion.

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 the absence of Christ's power and glory in our lives as individuals and in the life we share together. But this portion of the Advent season forces us to look in the

mirror and 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?*

Beyond Spin to Repentance

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 leader who dealt with a parishioner in a way that was mean and even slanderous. When confronted with such blatantly bad behavior, the best this leader 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 true 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. How might that have prepared the way for the coming of the Lord in her life, in her relationships, and in the community she was a part of?

This is the fruit of true repentance that John is calling us to. *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. It begins with us as leaders. 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.
~Amen⁴*

Practice

During this second week of Advent, take a few moments to ask God “What needs to happen *in me* to prepare the way for your coming? What crookedness needs to be straightened out? What empty valley needs to be filled? What mountain of my own ego needs to be made low? What rough edges of my character need to be smoothed out so that “all flesh” in my family, in my church, in my witness can see God’s salvation more clearly and be ready to receive it?”

¹ Read about the theme of *Waiting* at www.thetransformingcenter.org/newsletters.php *Advent: The Courage to Wait*, Ruth Haley Barton, December, 2009.

² John Shea, S.T.D., *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ William Storey, *A Seasonal Book of Hours*, (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), p.8.

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