

Straightening the Crooked Path

Preparing a way for GOD's kingdom come

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs
Advent 2C | Luke 3:1-6

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The Beginning

We begin again. We end. We begin.

Last week, as is tradition, we kicked off Advent, our church's New Year, with Jesus proclaiming the end. An auspicious and provocative way to say "Happy New Year! Here comes Jesus!"

And it is stylistically challenging for us to go to the beginning by starting at the end. We are waiting for a baby to be born here and we get adult Jesus talking about the end of the world.

We know that the church has a legit reason for doing this, but it feels no less awkward. We're talking about Jesus's precursor John today and next week, then we get Mary on the 4th Sunday and then the big day! This makes sense to us. We want to start at the beginning from the beginning, don't we?

Well, not always.

My theological training tells me that we aren't just talking about the first coming but also the second. Maybe that's too heady for us to really hold onto. Not without some help.

The lectionary is actually giving us a pretty cool frame here. We ended Year B with the Reign of Christ - a vision of the kingdom come. Our minds are moved to the what will be. And we begin the year with Jesus telling the disciples about what will be. And more importantly, how it will be.

The big line for us, the one that leads into John the Baptizer and what we are dealing with in Advent is this from Luke 23. Jesus says to them:

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

While they are focusing on the end, Jesus is telling them to be prepared, not for an end, but for a new beginning.

Be prepared.

Preparation

This is what John arrives into for us. Jesus told us last week to be prepared. Isn't that what we do in Advent? Isn't that the main agenda? We've got shopping and decorating and baking to do! We have events to plan and meals to shop for.

That is a form of preparation, of course. But we all know that isn't what Jesus is really talking about.

It is easy to hear prepare, as in John “prepares the way of the Lord” and think of comparable preparations, our preparations. But what are the preparations Jesus is speaking to?

He says don't let your heart be weighed down.

Then he gives three ways we weigh our hearts down: dissipation (which is debauchery, excess, over consuming), drunkenness, and “worries of this life”.

What I hear Jesus speaking to is to keep heart. He is telling them to keep their hearts in the game. That's the focus. Their goal. Keep heart in a dark time.

And what we're going to want to do in a dark time is to indulge the darkness and lose our hearts. We are going to want to drink away the pain or work away the pain and let insomnia make us too weary to think and feel and recognize what is going on.

But also, we are going to get together and read these words of Jesus's and what is going to distract us is a call to temperance. And we're going to focus on judging those who drink or those over-indulging or those seeking to dull their senses. We will lose heart because we will take on the worry of worry.

Like reading an article in which someone shames other people for shaming other people (who were essentially being shamed for the shame they put on other people). Distractions, all of them, from the instructions: keep heart. Keep heart because that's our thing.

Keep Heart

So John shows up. And we hardly get much about him here. Because the narrative is introducing the context of when John is showing up. And we take special note that it is when Herod is king, because Herod was an illegitimate king, placed on the throne by Rome. So this is the time and these are the people and we can assess the political landscape from that. Nobody likes Herod. Herod's a bad man.

We read that John goes around the region surrounding the Jordan River. So we're to the east of the main action. Then it says John comes

“proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”

So remember we are **keeping heart** and John is inviting us into **repentance** so that we can **be forgiven**. This is the foundation. Heart and mercy. Remove the things which weigh your heart down, which weigh you down. Get rid of that sin. Repent and receive mercy.

The way this is described in the gospel we call Mark is Jesus takes up the work of John after this, after his baptism and John's arrest. Jesus takes up John's mantle. A mantle of helping people loose themselves from the weights which drag their hearts into the mud. This is keeping heart.

And it is the gospel writer, the evangelist we call Luke who quotes Isaiah, comparing John the Baptist to the “one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the LORD, make his paths straight.” Prepare the way of Yahweh, make God's paths straight.

For John precedes Jesus, but it is GOD's kingdom that we are preparing. The Kingdom of GOD over which Christ will reign. This is John's message of repentance for a sinful generation. Not because they are screwing up or messing around, but because those paths we want GOD to traverse are crooked!

Those valleys are too deep! Those mountains are too high! We need to bring them down! Yahweh is on the move! Let him get here! *Your kingdom come, your will be done!* we pray everyday. *On earth as in heaven.* That we might live as GOD lives. *Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive...* Jesus taught us a prayer that could have been John's.

And the passage from Isaiah ends: "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

All flesh. Not just the good Christians.

Lifting our Hearts

As we prepare this season with hopeful expectation, let us hear this message with the juice John gives it. A message of repentance and loosing our hearts of the baggage and the pain and the junk we've been collecting in there for years. Let go of that stuff. That stuff doesn't just hold you back. It holds all of us back. It holds back the Kingdom.

When we lighten our hearts, when we give away the sin like plaque that's collected on our arteries, stifling our hearts and destroying our lives, we can breathe. We can run. We can love. We are freed from the evil that holds us down.

Every act of repentance, every move toward a place of mercy and renewed hope, every step toward the light of Christ brings us all that much closer to the Kingdom. To Christ here, with us. Every work, an incremental step, building the return, the reconciliation. Freedom.

For so many, this is a season of heavy hearts. Of loved ones lost, of missed friends, husbands, mothers. Sons and daughters. Cousins and grandparents. Of past memories of happy times and the lingering absence of them. For many, this isn't a happy season. And Jesus isn't telling us to just be happy.

But to say goodbye. Lighten the burden on our hearts. Give them away. That we might keep heart. Not distracted by the worries. But Focused on the preparation. For we have kingdom to come. A road to straighten and flatten and smooth. We have a highway to build for our GOD. And it only gets built if we all pitch in. Believe. With joy lightening our hearts.