

“Prepare Ye, Prepare Ye The Way Of The Lord”

- I. Introduction: Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord. Every year at this time, a strange, wild, and wooly guy comes out of the desert saying words that are the basis of the song from Godspell, “Prepare Ye, Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord!” His name is John the Baptist and he is one odd looking dude. His hair is long and uncombed, he has a full, uncut beard, and he’s dressed in rough camel skin. If you saw him on the sidewalk, you’d probably cross over to the other side of the street! Has it ever occurred to you that God sometimes uses the oddest people to give us messages?

- II. The Message. But whether or not we understand why today’s Gospel message is delivered the way it is, the message itself is clear. As I read from the translation of the Bible called The Message, listen again to what John the Baptist said:

“The real action comes next. The star in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stage-hand, will change your life. I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism – a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit – will change you from the inside out.”

The Baptist’s words are penetrating. This strange wild man, John the Baptist, comes each Advent to set the stage for Jesus’ birth. This birth at Christmas will be portrayed as a beautiful warm event. We will be awed by its mystery and its gentleness. All will seem so peaceful as Christ comes to us. But not so, said the Baptist – the peaceful infant comes to turn the world upside down and to turn us into a new reborn people who will join him in changing this world. Be vigilant says the Baptist – prepare for your hearts to be changed.

Let me give you an example of how that happens. A number of years ago I was invited by someone I will call Lynn, a fellow parishioner, to attend an Alcoholics Anonymous open meeting in which her birthday would be celebrated. Although she was in her late 40s, it was to be her first year birthday party. It was the birthday of her sobriety. You see my friend Lynn was an alcoholic. When you know her life story, you understand that she, like John the Baptist, had spent time in the wilderness and had had to go through a process in which she had to be changed from the inside out through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lynn had grown up in a very troubled family. Her parents were bright, successful professional people who fought constantly. There was mental illness in Lynn's family, including depression, and there was addiction. Lynn's mother drank heavily; Lynn's father tried to stay away from home as much as possible. He was a Roman Catholic and her mother Jewish, but neither practiced their faith. She grew up without any sense of who God is. Lynn herself suffered from both depression and anxiety as a teenager and began to use alcohol in high school to self-medicate herself. Because Lynn was very bright she went to a well-known liberal arts college for women and did well academically. But her depression and her alcohol use increased. There was a gap in her life that she couldn't seem to fill.

By the time I met Lynn, she had graduated from college, married, had a child, and developed a teaching career. But she continued to struggle. As is so often true, when I first met her I had no real sense of her life story or her deep unhappiness. She later told me that there were periods when she was so unhappy that she contemplated ending her life. But instead of ending, her life changed.

Several things happened. First, Lynn became a Christian. A member of our parish met Lynn at our village swimming pool. They began to talk about who Jesus Christ was and is, and what it means to become a Christian. Lynn accepted an invitation to attend our church. She later became a Christian, was baptized, and subsequently confirmed. Key idea number one in this story: We should not, my friends, ever assume that just because someone's life looks calm and happy on the outside that they might not really be struggling and hurting on the inside. Key idea number two in this story: And we should never assume that the people we meet will find out about Jesus Christ from someone else. They may very well need Christ, and you or I might be the one who will have the opportunity to introduce them to him and welcome them into the Body of Christ.

After becoming a Christian, Lynn's life began to change. What had been a downhill spiral stopped, and she began a slow climb out of depression and addiction. Over and over again, I have seen the Holy Spirit ignite a fire within Christians, helping them to become free of the many things that have hurt them and dragged them down, including addiction, depression, anxiety, self-absorption, and destructive patterns in relationships. But in every instance, the individual involved must reach out to the Holy Spirit to request God's help. The Holy Spirit does not work within us against our wills. Key idea number three: We, like Lynn, must be willing to take a good hard look at ourselves and acknowledge our shortcomings. Then, we have to be willing to try to change. This is called "repentance." The Greek word used for repentance is *metanoia*, meaning "a change of mind," brought about by turning away from sin and turning instead to God . . . *metanoia*.

- III. Metanoia is what we are about here in the Body of Christ. Followers of Jesus Christ have been warned by John the Baptist to be ready for a change from the inside out. Preparing the way of the Lord is not for the faint-hearted. The Spirit helps us look at ourselves and repent, and provides us with what we need in order to change. When we truly follow Christ, we become new creatures, reborn and transformed. This was what Lynn came to understand when she became a Christian and started to face her own addiction. She stopped blaming her struggles on her parents and her husband and her job and her income and on all the other things we are tempted to blame for our struggles. Lynn became progressively more hopeful about the possibility of change. You see one of the ways the Spirit strengthens us is through giving us hope. We all need hope in order to change and grow spiritually.
- IV. Conclusion. Be vigilant. The Baptist gives us good advice. Look for the signs of change that Christ will bring: the new energies in your life, the new yearnings, the new callings, and the still small voice of the Spirit. I had such an experience this week. Wednesday night I went to the class that Deacon Brett Backus taught on group Bible study. We listened to a passage from Luke that he had selected and each one of us opened ourselves to hear the word or phrase that was most powerfully speaking to us. At the end of the exercise we were asked to describe what we thought God was inviting us to do or change this week. My leading from the Spirit was the call “to become more vigilant – to notice intentionally what was happening around me and to respond.” That evening I left the church, and discovering that I had forgotten something, came back to pick it up. There in the foyer I met someone who needed help. We talked, and in a modest way I extended an offer of helpfulness to her. I believe God had engineered this “coincidental” meeting. But I believe that there are no coincidences with God, only opportunities that may or may not be taken.

This is the message of Advent: Be vigilant – look for opportunities to offer Christ to others whether you encounter them in the foyer of the church, in your homes, or somewhere else in the community. Be vigilant – also look for the signs that the Spirit is calling us to open ourselves to change from the inside out, to allow the coming of Christ into our lives this Advent to transform us. May we be vigilant enough to see the sacred opportunities we are being given. *Amen.*