

2nd Sunday of Advent, C
December 6, 2015
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Larson

Baruch 5:1-9
Luke 1:68-79
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

[click here to read scripture passages for the day](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Prepare the way of the Lord. This was the cry of John the Baptist before Jesus began his earthly ministry.

It is the cry the church hears again each Advent as we're called to prepare the way for Jesus to come again to bring in the kingdom of God and make all things new.

So, prepare the way of the Lord. What does this mean for us?

This is a time of year full of preparation:

- all the food, decorations, gifts, Christmas cards;
- all the work of getting ready for Christmas at Luther and at Vesterheim;
- our kids are getting ready for Christmas concerts and the Christmas program here;
- we prepare year end reports and final exams and think about end of the year giving;
- we get ready for guests; we make travel plans;
- we anticipate celebrations and many prepare to face grief and loneliness.

Lately we're also hearing a lot about a different kind of preparedness - many of our cities, workplaces and schools are doing drills to be prepared for terrorism or active shooters. With news like this, it sometimes feels like we have to brace ourselves, prepare ourselves, just to face the headlines each day.

It is an intense time of the year.

Yet, all of this preparation can help us imagine what it means to prepare the way of the Lord. Preparing the way of the Lord isn't just about our lives at church. It is about our whole lives and even the whole world - valleys will be filled, mountains and hills made low. And our whole lives can teach us about how to prepare the way of the Lord.

- Preparing for travel helps us think about how much we really need to carry with us - important reflection because so often our stuff becomes an obstacle to living in the ways of God's kingdom.
- Preparing a year end budget involves assessment of the past and anticipation of the future - crucial tasks in the life of faith.
- Rehearsing for a holiday concert involves practicing and working together as a community - also key.
- Even bracing ourselves to face the headlines can help us think about how we can engage the world without being overwhelmed by it, and how we can face fear and violence with hope and courage - crucial work in preparing the way of the Lord.

The image I'm reflecting on most these days, maybe because I'm hosting my sister's young family this Christmas, is the image of preparing for guests.

Thinking about how we welcome guests in our homes and in our congregation can help us imagine preparing the way of the Lord.

Now I'm fairly certain that John the Baptist gave almost no thought to welcoming guests into a home. He spent most of his time in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey. I'm guessing no one would have wanted to go to stay with crazy cousin John for very long, but he did think a lot about how we ought to welcome and receive our God. And the things he lifts up are some of the same things we do to prepare for guests.

A few weeks ago I asked the kids and parents in our communion class what we do when we're getting ready to welcome guests for a meal at our house. The parents immediately responded "we clean." I'd been hoping for the answer "we set the table" as it fit my teaching aims, but as soon as I asked the question I knew what they were going to say, what I'd say. We clean!

When guests are coming, we often feel like we should clean up the place. (This is part of why it's important for me to have guests in my home - it is pretty much the only time my house gets clean.)

We also often look more deeply at our house and the things we've been ignoring - the clutter, the smudges on the windows, the squeaky door, the burned-out light bulbs.

Whenever my in-laws are coming to visit, I think about how their home is always so clean and peaceful.

- Every time we visit they prepare and think of everything that will make our stay more comfortable.
- They even move into the guest bedroom for the week so we can have more room in their larger bedroom.
- I wish I could create that much space in my home and my life to welcome them.

At the same time, I think about my aunt Sissel, a Norwegian citizen who came to the US when she was 25. I lived near her family when I was in seminary and she hosted me all the time. She never worried about how her house looked.

- She'd say "if I waited to host until my house was clean I'd never have anyone over, and I want to have you in my home."
- Her messy house never once affected the quality of my experience in her home.
- She always made space in her life for me even if there wasn't always a clear space to sit down.
- So why do I care so much about how my house looks to guests?

Preparing for guests often involves some self-examination of our homes, our lifestyles and our assumptions.

John the Baptist calls us to a similar kind of cleansing, self-examination and clearing out - personally and as communities. He calls us to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And this isn't just a kind of spot-clean, quick touch up, to make ourselves try to look good on the outside. John calls us to repentance - to a re-orientation of our lives.

This is a kind of clear-out-the-closets, get-the-dust-from-inside-the-light fixtures, flip- the-mattress-over kind of cleaning.

John calls us to this kind of re-orienting, not so that we can impress God with how good and clean and righteous we are, but rather that all the valleys and mountains and obstacles in our lives and communities can be cleared away so that there is space for God.

This preparation is about having the space to see, welcome and receive God in our lives and our communities.

John uses the language of valleys being filled, of mountains and hills being made low.

Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, when Mary learns she will welcome Jesus into her body, she uses similar language. She says Jesus' coming means the hungry are filled, the rich emptied, the lowly lifted up, and the proud brought down from their thrones and made low.

The coming of the Lord will affect everything - the environment, political structures, our communities and congregations, the distribution of food and resources. Which means that preparing the way and making space for the coming of the Lord involves examining all these arenas of life - asking if they help us and others to see and receive God's ways of justice and peace, or if they are obstacles.

This is a big job to do in the midst of all of the other preparation this time of year. Yet this isn't work we need to do in addition to the rest of our tasks. It is a way life, a way of being in the midst of all that we are doing. It is a way of approaching our life and our world seeking to be open to God and God's ways.

This is work we are called to do and scripture tells us it is also work that God is doing on our behalf, on behalf of the whole world.

As our first reading for today says “For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground.”

And today, Jesus comes to us in his Word, in his body the church, and in his body and blood in Holy Communion to prepare us to welcome and receive him when he comes again to make all things new.

He comes to us today to re-orient us, to create space within us and to open us to see.

Thanks be to God.