



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

PREPARE THE WAY

Sermon for Advent 1 (based on lectionary for Advent B2)

November 27, 2011

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

As we come together to begin the Advent season, I want you to consider with me that Advent begins in darkness and ends at Christmas Eve when a bright light shines in the sky, a star so bright that both shepherds and wise men are said to be able to follow it to the manger where the baby Jesus lies. This morning we lit one candle on the Advent wreath to express our hope in the growing light of Christmas. It's such a temptation to jump right into the joy of Jesus' birth, singing Christmas Carols, giving gifts, and celebrating in many different ways. It's hard to wait. It's no fun being in the darkness; however, I believe preparation is important and facing the darkness, whether in us or in the world is such an important part of Christmas. We much prefer to think about happiness, smiles on the faces of Mary and Joseph, and excitement about a tiny baby. Many of us try to make Christmas all about joy and peace to help us forget if only for a little while the uncertainties and losses we have experienced in the rest of this year. Remember the first Advent candle is the candle of HOPE, and if we jump right to the birth and the manger we will miss the journey of hope that gets us there. In Isaiah the tone is set for Advent as it talks about expectant hope, rooted in God's love for God's people. We may not be exiles from our homeland as in Isaiah; however, we do live daily with economic uncertainty, fears of terrorism, violence of many sorts all around us. There is a lot of darkness, more for some than for others. My own hope this Advent is that a new world is being born into our midst. Maybe the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement are signs of such a shift? I wonder.



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

2

This morning I invite you to begin the journey of Advent hope by thinking about Mary and Joseph as they begin traveling the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. First though I want to talk a little about the Bible readings at the beginnings of the journey. Most of you are familiar with the lectionary, the scriptures that are given to clergy to follow Sunday by Sunday in a three year rotation. This is year B and the Gospel is Mark; last year it was Matthew and next year it will be Luke, with John thrown in here and there every year. If you have ever read these gospel stories in a comparative way, you will note that they all are different. In our Christmas pageants we usually merge them together. To complicate things further, because this year I get to preach only 2 out of the 4 Advent Sundays I have done some switching and combining which I'm sure none of you care about but I just wanted to notify you.

In the gospel of Mark, there is no birth story at all. Mark, the first Gospel written starts in with the proclamation of John the Baptist. John quotes from the Isaiah reading of today about preparing the way for the Lord. We are told that John has been living in the wilderness of Judea, eating honey and wild locusts and dressed in garments of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist. Matthew and Luke have much more detail about John; however, the consistent theme is John announcing that Jesus is coming and will be much greater and more powerful than John. In the meantime John is preaching that all need to repent of their sins, and he baptizes them with water for their forgiveness. Some of you may remember that John was born of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin and was only a few months older than Jesus. So obviously this first chapter does not take place anywhere near the time of Jesus' birth. We borrow from the other gospels to reflect on this journey of Mary and Joseph.



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

3

We know that Joseph and Mary are just beginning their life together. She is pregnant and Joseph has been reassured in a dream that the child is not from another man but conceived from the Holy Spirit. (This information is in the Gospel of Matthew). Joseph, along with the other citizens of Rome, was required to go to his home town of Bethlehem to register for tax purposes. None of the canonical gospels say anything about Mary riding on a donkey; however, it's very possible. The distance of 70 miles would be a long walk for a woman about to give birth. Just as this was a long and laborious journey for Mary and Joseph, we too need to spend time thinking about and preparing for Jesus' birth. This waiting can be filled with a discipline of prayer, meditation, and reflection. We reflect on what we are hoping for this Advent, and what do we need to do to bring it about.

Our guide, John the Baptist, instructs us to repent. There is a term for repentance that I like—*metanoia*—which mean to change—change one's mind; have a change of heart. Repentance is not just a mental thing; true repentance is a change of behavior, a change that brings justice to our surroundings, both close and far away. When we repent, we get involved in actions such as visiting the sick, joining Occupy Wall Street, volunteering at the Food Pantry, learning and teaching others about Jesus. Prepare the way of the Lord! Make the paths straight. Live the kind of life that others by observing you can see the way to God. This *metanoia* is all about helping and supporting each other; forgiving ourselves and others, promoting justice, fairness and equality. If we want a better world, we have to be part of the solution. I urge each of you to ask the Spirit if there is anything in your life that is not pleasing to God. Likewise, is there anything that God is calling you to do? I believe John was asking us to turn away from anything that creates barriers between human beings, anything that oppresses others or ourselves: addictions,



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

4

consumerism, racism, homophobia, classism, and ageism? May you reflect on what gives you hope-- what helps you to move out of the darkness into the light.

Joseph and Mary discovered that the way of the Lord was not what they had expected. No room at the inn. No comfortable place for this teenage girl to give birth to Jesus. It's a wonder that those shepherds and wise men that were hunting for baby Jesus could find him. Is it possible that this whole Advent journey teaches us to look for God in unexpected places? Who would have expected the Messiah, God's own self to be born homeless and laid in a manger among the animals! Be aware that the Advent journey may direct you to look for God in unexpected places.

For the next four weeks will you join with me in a journey from darkness to light? When we see each other, instead of asking, "Are you ready for Christmas?" what about asking instead, "Are you ready for Christ?" Let's share the hope God will once again break into our world, very possibly in a way we do not expect. Together with the help of God we can help give birth to a new and better world. Are you ready to begin? Amen and amen!!