John 1:1-23 December 9, 2018

*The Second Sunday of Advent 2018*

*“For What/Whom Are We Preparing?”*

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 Last week our challenge for the first Sunday of Advent was about what we are looking for during this Advent & Christmas season. Because what we are looking for and where we are looking for it, and how we are looking for it determines what we see, folks. And what we see determines our attitudes, our behaviors, and certainly the content of our Christmas gatherings. The challenge last week came through the spoken Word and the visual Word with a much-simplified presentation of the Sanctuary for the season. Did we see what wasn’t here in disappointment, or did we see the content – the star, the manger, the throne, the cross, and (what I missed last week), the color red of the poinsettias representing the shed blood of Jesus Christ for you and me? Today we have a new challenge regarding our preparations for Christmas Day.

If I’m expecting an old friend to come to my house for tea, the way I prepare for their arrival is very different than if I am expecting someone I’ve never met before. Our preparations for someone’s arrival says something about the relationship we have with the one we are expecting. I think we can apply this to our preparations for Christmas. How we prepare reveals the depth of our relationship with the One for whom we wait. Let us pray:

 *Heavenly Father, help us today. We have a lot on our minds. We have a lot on our hearts. We have worries. We have fears. We have disappointments. But here we are. Open our hearts, our ears, and our minds to your voice, and your voice alone. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

 Our biblical text for today comes from The Gospel of John as the beginning of the fulfillment from the prophet Isaiah 40:1-3. Let’s first look at Isaiah 40:1-3, *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.* ***2****Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.* ***3****A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”* Approximately 700 years later we read in John 1 about John the Baptist, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.****2****He was with God in the beginning.****3****Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.****4****In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.****5****The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* ***6****There was a man sent from God whose name was John.****7****He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.****8****He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. . . .* ***19****Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leadersin Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.****20****He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”* ***21****They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.”* ***22****Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”* ***23****John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”* ‘Make straight’ is another way of saying, ‘Prepare the way’ of the Lord.

 That’s what John the Baptist was conceived and born to do – to prepare the way for the Lord! He was prophesied about by the prophet Isaiah as the one calling in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord! John’s mission was to call people to repent from their sins (meaning that they needed to be honest about their sins and then to turn away from them) *so that* their hearts would be open to the message of salvation preached by Jesus when he arrived! John’s job was to prepare the way of the Lord – to prepare the way for the Lord.

 Last Sunday evening we hosted the Penn State Mont Alto Chorale for a Christmas concert here in the sanctuary. After the concert we hosted a reception to greet our guests who came for the concert and to give them an opportunity to interact with the chorale members and the Penn State Mont Alto faculty and staff who accompanied them. The featured treat for the reception was Penn State Creamery ice cream. To get ready for the reception we set up a table with a tablecloth, put out nice Christmas napkins and bowls, and prepared some cranberry punch. We brought all of our ice cream scoopers up from the kitchen. We knew what we were serving, and we knew what we needed to serve it, and we had everything prepared. The result? A reception that was relaxed and enjoyable for all. How we prepare for things matters not just for ourselves but for the people around us.

 Christmastime comes with all sorts of memories and emotions for people. It can be a vibrant, wonderful time of the year or it can be truly difficult to get through. People can get downright cranky because of the money they feel obligated to spend, because of the extra activities they feel obligated to attend, because of the aunt and uncle they feel obligated to be nice to even though they are really rude and grumpy and never lift a finger to help, because of the increased traffic when all you want to do is get your groceries, because of the people who insist on saying ‘happy holidays’ instead of ‘Merry Christmas!’ Because, because, because, because, because…. Because people feel pressured to pretend that everything is merry and bright, and sometimes it just isn’t…

 On Friday I led the funeral for the father of a high school friend. Seventeen years ago, his son, my friend, died at the age of 45. Thirteen days after that his other son’s wife died of cancer on Christmas Day. December is a tough month for this family. But let’s be honest, December can be a tough month for anyone who has had a loved one die at any time in your life because Christmas is ‘billed’ as a time for families to gather around the tree eating beautifully prepared Christmas cookies, and singing carols in four-part harmony while wearing clothes that are clean, wrinkle-free, and maybe even color-coordinated with the rest of the group. A Hallmark Christmas Movie – where everything turns out just as it should. The pressure these images put on people can be crushing, especially when we are grieving, or there’s no extra money for gifts, or a loved one is sick and in need of all the extra time and energy we have. Sixteen years ago, we were gathering as a family for our first Christmas after Cicely was stillborn. So many hopes and dreams were gone, and it seemed as if every Christmas commercial had a baby in it. Every year since then, I see my sweet and strong firstborn daughter battle to keep her grief at bay as soon as the decorations start showing up in the stores.

 John the Baptist’s mission was to prepare the way of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord came. He was born, he lived, he died, he rose from the dead, and he ascended into heaven. So, does that mean that the time of ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’ is over since Jesus already came? I don’t think so, since we know that one day he will return – and we are called not to be unprepared. There are many stories in the New Testament about being prepared for Jesus’ return. I think that means that as his disciples, we still have some preparing work to do. How do we do it? How do we fulfill this part of our mission? How do we prepare the way of the Lord in our own lives, in our own hearts, our own families, our own schools, our own workplaces, and our own casual gathering places?

 Maybe you’ve never thought about this before. But let’s give it a try. How are we preparing the way for him? Does it matter how we use social media if we are on mission to prepare the way of the Lord? Absolutely! Are we making sure that the posts we make or the posts we share, including the pictures we send are honoring to the Savior in every way? Are we careful about the words that come out of our mouths and the attitudes that drive them? Is what we are doing and saying opening the way for the Lord to come into a situation you’re facing or a friend is facing? Is it softening a heart that has perhaps been hard towards Jesus or towards His church?

This is important friends, because, because, because, because, because . . . Because (are you ready for it?) Christmas for the disciple of Jesus is not a one-day event. We are not being called just to prepare the way for December 25th, just like Katie & Hunter were not being called just to prepare for their wedding day yesterday. They were being called over these last months to prepare for their marriage, for what happens after that one big day.

We’ve all heard people say, and most of us (no doubt) have said it ourselves, “We had Christmas this past Saturday.” We ‘had Christmas?” What does that mean? It means, “We got together with family and we exchanged presents.” “When are you ‘having Christmas?’ we ask each other.

 For what are we preparing in these weeks? An event? A moment in time? A few moments of chaos while the wrapping on packages is ripped off? A day of sadness as we miss the chaos that used to be – as we think about who is no longer beside us? I’m not making light of this. I get it. My family gets it. But let me ask it again, “For what are we preparing?” An event? A moment in time? Did the holy family do their time in the stable with the shepherds and the star and all that – and then – everything was over? High fives – that was a fun Christmas. Can’t wait ‘til next year! Now let’s go check out the after-Christmas sales!

 The Word, Jesus Christ, became flesh and lived among us. The Word became flesh and has never ceased to live among us. The Word became flesh and will never cease to live among us. This miracle is not an event that comes and goes. The secularized Christmas comes and goes. The decorations arrive in the stores and then they go on sale and then they’re gone as Valentine hearts take their place. But the birth of the Savior of the world, the birth of the Savior of your soul is an ongoing, lifetime adventure that cannot and must not be confined to a few hours or to a single day on a calendar.

 So, as Christians, how should we prepare for Christmas? We worship. We focus. We invite others to join us. We read the beautiful story of the fulfillment of the promise God made to open the way back to Him. We help our children understand, in word and in deed, why there is a time set apart called Christmas. We don’t let non-church attenders dictate a time to gather that takes us away from where we know we need to be to keep our focus on Christ. We take time to pray at family gatherings, thanking God for the gift of Jesus, even if its uncomfortable because not everyone there believes. We prepare the way. We open our hearts to the possibilities. We don’t write anyone off, ever. We pray. We pray. We pray. God didn’t give up on us, and so we don’t give up on the old grump in the corner, or the loud and obnoxious atheist, or the one person you’d rather send to hell than see in heaven. Be the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord!

 In our house I have a little tub full of non-breakable figures from many different nativity sets I’ve bought over the years. Our little granddaughter Peyton was at our house for a couple of hours on Friday afternoon and she was setting up the figures. She had baby Jesus in his ‘crib’ as she called it and showed it to me. I took the little figure of Jesus and I kissed it. “I love him,” I said. She just looked at me. I could see the ‘wheels’ turning. And that’s what we want. We want the way that we prepare for this most important arrival to make some wheels turn, to cause others to stop and think about where they are in their own relationship with Jesus not just for December 25th but for the rest of their lives! He came so that we would be reborn, not of flesh of blood, but born of God. What a miracle. What a gift. What a mission we have – to persistently, gently, and humbly prepare the way of the Lord by reflecting his love wherever he sends us.

 Let us pray: Holy and Ever-merciful God, we know that you have come and that one day, you will come again. We confess that we have not lived in expectation of your kingdom, living casual lives, ignoring your promised judgment. We have accepted lies as truth, exploited our neighbors, abused the earth, and refused your justice and peace. We have not prepared the way of the Lord. In your mercy, forgive us. (silence). This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Let us continue our prayer in song:

*Oh, holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.*

*We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.*

Amen.

Words of Assurance: The angel came to Joseph and told him that the baby to be born should be called “Jesus,” for he will save his people from their sins. And that’s what he did, for you and for me. Receive his forgiveness and be at peace with God, with one another, and with yourself. Thanks be to God, Amen.