

Preparing, always
Menno Mennonite Church
Advent Year B Week 3
December 13, 2020

Message: We are invited into the preparation of the way of God.

Purpose: To recollect the role we each hold in declaring the life-altering way of God with us.

Scripture: John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 [secondary text]

Synopsis: We are promised a vision of the kingdom where all is right and just. Yet we keenly feel how far away this vision seems to be. We are even tempted to simply say that this is all there is and nothing can ever change and give into the sorrow of the world. Yet, as we wait, as we look for the kingdom coming, we are invited to hold on to what is good, what is right and declare with John the coming of a new way of love and justice. It is in the declaration of what is to be that the kingdom takes shape around us. We do this balancing always the one to whom we point.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."

²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No."

²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,

²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

(Joh 1:6-28 NRS)

[Transforming Our Sorrow joh 1_6-9 19-28 12-11-2011.docx](#)
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This morning is as good a time as any to clear something up. Now and again there just needs to be some explanation of things. I need to tell you that I am not the Messiah. I can understand how this can be a shock and confusing given my inclination to walk about and speak in parables and other ways beyond comprehension. Despite my inclination to pretend that somehow I wear a cape and can leap small buildings and do feats of endurance, I am still not the Messiah. I do not have the salvation of Menno, this place, or any other place or person in my hands alone; I cannot save my self, come to that. It doesn't mean I don't enjoy trying my best from time to time. But I am far from the genuine article; and I am willing to saw that neither are you; unless of course we are overdue for a long conversation involving phrases like "no one comes to the father except through me". Its not you. And, while we are in the neighborhood, neither are we Elijah, the prophet by trade or anything else. And thank God we are not.

But, boy, is it ever tempting to think otherwise. It is tempting to behave otherwise. Not only would that make things a whole lot easier in terms of dealing with the world, it would also meet the deep desire that I think many of us have to fix stuff. We want to make stuff better, or are least to address the need in front of us and make it go away. I think part of the reason we all love a good action flick is because it is so fun to occupy that role even for a minute or two. We can imagine that we have super human strength and speed, can beat the bad guys (who for what ever reason always have catastrophically bad aim), get the girl, and save the day. I know that when I get done watching a Bond film or something like that, the rest of the day I feel like I should be wearing a tuxedo and making quips about things not going as planned for the schmuck who just took us on. One of the grinding frustrations of this season is that we have a problem and the only way for us to solve the problem is to wait, to follow a bunch of fairly uncomfortable rules, and wait some more. That's not the hero's journey; that doesn't feed the sense of power that we want to have. It doesn't support our messianic inclinations, and that's a pity.

We come by it honestly enough. We want to be caring compassionate people; we want to make the world better; we want to make ourselves better. So now and again we try on messiah and try to fix things as they ought. I know I have more than once. It doesn't usually end well. We try to be the one, and sometimes we wish that we could make the difference for our family, our world, our community, ourselves—that our better angels would just powerfully be recognized, people would do what we say and we could cross one more problem off the list. But more times than not, it is usually when we think we are the chosen one, the one to make ALL the

difference that we find ourselves disappointed. While few of us are going around and actually claiming to be the Messiah, that doesn't mean that sometimes wish we could be.

This all makes John the Baptist an even more unique character than he already is. John was perhaps the first crazy street preacher, and what's more he's effective. And that is saying something. Because there is something innately human about wanting to have the inside track on knowledge, insight, and power. I think that is part of why we see so much desire to believe the cryptic right now; it makes us feel good that we see what other do not. What made John different was that he knew deeply and fully who he was and what he was asked to do—to point beyond himself—and he stuck to it. How much for frustrating to the religious authorities can you be. They come and ask: 'are you the Messiah?' They are offering you the job; your own followers have in some cases given you the job, all you have to do is say yes! But no matter what door they open, John simply says 'Nope; that's not me. I am pointing to something else.' All he wanted to do is proclaim that a new kingdom is coming, to prepare the way for the one who comes next. He knew who he was, and he was willing to live within that, even when it made him sound a little bit insane along the way.

We are all pointing beyond ourselves, and it is good from time to time to remember that. To remember that we individual do not bear the singular responsibility to bring Joy to the World, only to be a part of it. As I have walked with folks in 12 step programs, I have been struck with the importance of knowing who they are—I am an alcoholic, they regularly intone—becomes in shaping who they ultimately become. Without that basic, uncomfortable knowledge they are lost. I think we are healthily do the same with our faith—to confess that we do not possess ultimate authority; that we wait on the one who is coming still. Advent invites us to hold that in front of us: that in the midst of the celebration, the hub-bub and all the rest, that we declare that we are waiting for one that comes beyond us. That what we see is not the whole story, the only story. That the story does not end here, but continues well beyond us. That we wait on the one who comes after. Advent calls us to do things differently than the simple Celebration that we may be used to.

- 1) We must be preparing ourselves for Christ's coming and for the Reign of God that Christ manifests in our world and our lives. This means shifting the focus of our lives from us and our circumstances to that of God and God's Reign. This is work; this is an ongoing

project. But it starts with moving from the focus on the immediate and its challenge, and daring to see the possibility of dawn coming, even in the darkest hour. This is not an Orphan Annie sort of optimism, but as a deep abiding hope that comes from the inside out. We are not always ready to do this, ready to declare this, but the invitation remains all the same.

- 2) Believing in Christ, by which does not mean agreeing to a few select intellectual ideas about Christ, replacing the word made flesh with the word made more words. Rather, this means placing our entire beings under the direction of God's Reign, God's compassion and peace. It's about being directed and formed by the kingdom coming as much as the kingdom professed. We are given to think that faith is only about the certainty of things we are not able to prove, and we either have it when we accept those things, or we don't when we doubt. Whether in certainty or doubt, we are invited to turn ourselves, our whole selves, toward the living of the Kingdom in the world. We live our faith as much if not more so as we profess it, and advent reminds us that this is an ever evolving process, inviting to turn yet again.
- 3) We must allow our lives to speak as demonstrations of what God's reign looks like. We do this not because we create that reign by doing so, or that we are responsible for maintaining it, but rather because it points toward the true reality that underlies even the worst of situations. We often think our lives and our faith would have been far easier in the first person generation, those times when people saw bushes burn and astrologers interpreted stars in the sky to speak of a heavenly revelation. We forget that all generations are indeed first person; that God is acting. Perhaps not to the way or the end or by the means that we would prefer, but God is acting, and acting in our very midst and in our very lives. And we are invited to respond. The key is to get ourselves and our presuppositions about what is going on out of the way and dare to say 'behold, there is your God'; even when that beyond all comprehension. We act for peace, we bind the wounded, we mourn with those who mourn, not because we must, but because God with us is a reality that is made flesh in real-time; in our time, in our lives, and through our actions. And it all points back to the one who came before us to show us the way and the one who will come after us to bind, fully and finally, every wound.

The good news of advent is that we are not, in the end the Messiah. And what good news that is. We join with John in preparing the way of the Lord in the here and now. We know that the crooked needs to be straightened. We know that justice has yet to roll like a might stream, and the lion to lay down with the lamb. And we grieve that. And we fight that. Because we are preparers of the way of the Lord. Yet the worry remains where it belongs; where it always has belonged: with the God with us that we celebrate this season and who has never left.

We live in the already even as we prepare the way for the not yet. We must feel the promise and the pain of this and every season. We know that one is coming after that will dry every tear, will right every wrong, will bring all things to peace. May we, each in our own way, be given the courage to prepare the way of the Lord, knowing that it one who is yet coming who will bring all things to completion. And may we be freed to speak, act, and live with all joy as we prepare the way of the Lord.