

Advent2, Year B, 120411
All Saints Episcopal Church

Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

In the name of the One who was and is and is to come. Amen.

Last Sunday, we lit the first candle on the Advent wreath to start the new church year. Jim reminded us that this is a season of watching, being alert, staying awake for the One who is coming. It is hard to match the feeding frenzy (literal and figurative) that occurs on Thanksgiving Day and the following 48 hours with a scene of waiting and watchfulness. The few days since Thanksgiving seem to me to have been a time of craziness, of rushing around - anything but quiet calm. But if you got out your Advent wreath and have been lighting the same candle every day this week - even though you were decorating for Christmas all the while - you may have felt like an old friend of mine, who said that waiting to be able to light the second candle on the wreath makes the days pass quite slowly. It's like being in class, he said, and you keep looking at your watch for the period to end, and the hands on the watch never seem to move.

That reminds me of a wonderful piece of advertising - a TV commercial that ran in the late '70's that I have associated with Advent ever since. Some of you may remember it. It was a ketchup commercial. Very simply, a guy is holding a bottle of ketchup upside down, trying to pour it out on his food, but the ketchup is so thick (and therefore better than the other brand) that it doesn't even seem to be moving. And in the background you hear the Carly Simon song, "Anticipation". A great image of waiting!

Since then, though, things have changed. Our culture doesn't really like waiting anymore. We don't like to wait in line. So now we can self-check ourselves out of the grocery store. (Although it really takes me longer than waiting in a 'real' checkout line, because I can't seem to follow the instructions of 'the voice' in the machine.) We use debit cards now, almost exclusively, instead of writing checks, because it takes too long to fill out the check and show your driver's license to the clerk, and let the clerk write down the driver's license number...you get the picture. We rack up credit card debt because we don't want to wait to save the money for something we want. We yell at our computers when they are 'too slow'. We blow our car horns the moment a traffic light turns green and the people in front of us don't make a fast enough start.

So here we are, waiting, preparing for, anticipating Christmas Day. Are you ready? Let's go down the checklist.

First of all, there's the decorating. We have to clean up the house some in order to bring all the boxes out of the closet or down from the attic. There are wreaths to be hung, bows to be tied, lights to go on the bushes or trees or even the house. Then there's the tree - what kind to get, how tall should it be, does it have any bare spots we need to worry about - and all those strings of lights to be untangled from last year, not to mention the ornaments that evoke the feelings of Christmases past. Don't forget to put out the nativity scene. And of course, no one is completely ready for Christmas if the presents aren't bought and wrapped.

But there is more to preparing for Christmas than getting the decorations out and wrapping the presents. Those are the material preparations. We also have to prepare emotionally. With every tree ornament or mantle decoration, with every Christmas present or nativity figurine, we articulate another expectation, another hope for Christmas.

In the Gospel reading today John the Baptist is calling the people to prepare. John came out of the wilderness shouting, "Prepare the way of the Lord." He is heralding the coming of a king, God's anointed, the Messiah.

In the ancient world when a king decided to visit a part of his kingdom, he would send someone ahead of him to announce his arrival. This herald would also instruct the people to prepare the roads and streets for the monarch's arrival. They should clean up the streets, fill in the potholes. They wouldn't want the King to remember them for the bumps in their roads. Of course the instruction to prepare the roads is a metaphor for all the preparations of the community for the king's visit. They were to make it look the best they could. Be ready to receive the king with the best accommodations they could provide.

People were used to making their communities presentable for a king. They would decorate their houses and clean their streets. They would prepare a place for the king to stay and stock up the supplies so he could eat well.

Of course the king for whom John the Baptist was the herald wasn't interested in inspecting their streets. Jesus didn't care if the streets had potholes. John was

speaking of spiritual preparation. John was really saying, "Straighten out your lives in preparation for God's chosen King. Make your lives presentable for the King of kings. Make the way straight for him to enter into your lives. Smooth out the places that would make his journey rough. Be ready to accommodate the King of kings. Repent of your sins and turn to God."

So how do we get ready on the inside? Despite the fact that we don't like to wait, we have to wait a lot, and some of us get to be good at it. We wait for God to hear our prayers for someone who is very ill. We wait for peace - forever, it seems. We wait and wait and wait. And while we are waiting, we can approach getting ready in a couple of ways: we can sit back and expect whatever we are waiting for to be delivered to us, or we can work while we wait - work to help bring about God's kingdom. We do that by the usual litany of works of mercy: feeding, clothing, giving drink, visiting, and healing. We do that by speaking words of hope and promise to a world that is filled with fear and uncertainty and despair.

Especially in this season of Advent, we must speak words of hope. We must tell the world that in the midst of darkness, light is about to break in. In the midst of despair, hope will erupt. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. The complete fulfillment of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. So amid the very real setbacks, disappointments, or worries of this life, we can prepare the way because John has told us that our "redemption draws near." Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope.

Are we ready? Look closely: we all have rough places that could be smoothed over and crooked ways that could use some straightening. Let's smooth them out and straighten them up, because our King is coming!