

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon December 8th 2019

Jesus Prepares a Place for Us!

Today we lit the second candle of Advent. The candle of preparation, which is a significant theme within the Advent season. A season where we reflect on the Second coming of Jesus, and what we need to do to prepare ourselves and our world for Jesus' return. Last week we talked about living faithfully as we continue to wait. Or I always liked Martin Luther's response to the question: "What would you do if the world ended tomorrow?" He said "I would plant a tree." So, keep being the church in the world revealing where God's kingdom is already present. Giving people a foretaste of what is to come. This is one way we participate in this preparation theme in Advent.

Advent has also become a season where we reflect on the preparation John the Baptist and others did before Jesus's first arrival in Bethlehem. So, we too can prepare our hearts and minds for the Christmas Season. The celebration of the birth of Jesus.

In our gospel this morning, we hear John preaching an invitation to repentance as he prepares the way for Jesus to come. In the biblical Greek *metanoia*, the word for repentance is a verb meaning to turn. To change direction. So, when we repent to God we are turning our hearts, minds, and physical bodies away from our negative thoughts and behaviors and towards God's teachings and actions of love for the world.

Or in other words, through repentance we prepare our hearts, minds, and bodies to hear and live out the transformative message Jesus preaches to us. Letting go of all those presumptions and stereotypes we learn along the way about people that often impact our behaviors and thoughts in negative ways.

This past year I taught a course on Muslim-Christian relations in three different settings where I could see some people were really challenged by what they were learning. I attended a blanket exercise to learn more about how our history has impacted our indigenous neighbors. I also participated in an online course out of the U of A that challenged me to listen to our history from a variety of indigenous voices. So, I participated in a lot of education this past year that challenged me and the people I learned with.

When I think of this theme of preparation during our Advent season I am reminded of how significant it is to prepare our hearts and minds before taking a course/study/seminar or even entering into a dialogue with someone that will challenge some of our preconceived learnings about this someone or a specific group of people. If we don't open our hearts and minds up to the possibility that we might learn something new even if it challenges us then we might hinder our ability to learn and grow in knowledge and in relationship with one another.

Repentance. Admitting we did or said or thought something wrong isn't easy. It takes a lot to suck up our pride and genuinely repent. Preparing to learn something new about someone or a group of people isn't easy. Presumptions and stereotypes are hard to shake, because they are often reinforced by a multitude of mediums. But, we see what happens when we are unable to come prepared. We end up struggling with the challenges we face, and may not be ready to hear what our teacher or neighbor has to say.

John invests so much time in calling people to repentance, because he wants their hearts open to hear what Jesus has to say. Knowing that Jesus will have some challenging things to say. In fact, Jesus' message becomes so challenging for people to hear that later in Matthew's gospel we see that even John needs reassurance that Jesus is who he really says he is.

With this in mind, Advent becomes the season where we consciously reflect on where our hearts are at, and if we need to turn our hearts to hear what Jesus has to say to us even when this message sometimes challenges us.

When I first started putting the discipleship challenge together I wondered where it best would fit in our calendar year. Well, I decided on Advent, because Advent is a season where we are invited to turn our hearts and our minds to hear Jesus' message of love, hope, and renewal. Jesus' message that sometimes challenges us. Jesus' message that often times lifts us up.

We are invited to turn our hearts to this message in the midst of all the secular commercialism we are bombarded with during this time of year. In the midst of the overwhelmingly busy days that seem to appear when our calendar turns to December. In the midst of the cold winter breeze that makes its presence felt more and more. In the midst of all the messages out there that discount our feelings of sadness by telling us we have to be happy this time of year. In the midst of a season in our lives where there are so many distractions that make it more difficult for us to keep living faithfully.

So, John preaches to us to repent. To turn our hearts back to the manger. To turn our hearts back to the promise that Jesus will come again and make everything right. To turn our hearts back to the hospitality Jesus shows us and invites us to live out.

Hospitality, another way to look at how we prepare for Jesus. John the Baptist invites us to prepare our hearts to be hospitable to Jesus' teachings. Jesus then comes and invites us into the kingdom of God. I think of John's gospel where Jesus says he is going to prepare a place for us. Jesus shows us amazing hospitality inviting us to experience God's kingdom come. To follow him to see all that he will do.

Through Jesus' hospitality we are called to welcome others. To invite them into the experience of God's kingdom come.

When I think of hospitality, especially around Christmas, like repentance, like preparing for a course to learn and grow, I think of the challenges of being hospitable. How much preparation it takes to get the house just right for our guests?

Cleaning every room from top to bottom so our guests feel comfortable. Making sure they have everything they need from food to good entertainment. Being attentive. Understanding their needs and being as accommodating as possible. Welcoming them as they are. There is a lot that goes into preparing for our guests.

Yet, when we take time to prepare for our guests they feel welcome and loved, and are more inspired to imitate this love to others. If we decide to leave the house in a big mess. Letting them know that they can just push the garbage into the corner of the room before sitting down. If we spend all our time running around ignoring them. Or if we spend too much time staring at that new ring in their nose or that weird hair color. If we create an uncomfortable environment where they don't feel welcome, whether it is serving them food that they cannot eat, or saying or doing something that discriminates against them, then they often feel unloved and are less likely inspired to come back. Their wounds may make it harder for them to love others.

How often does an environment of inhospitality hurt us? How often do we then create walls to protect ourselves from future hurts?

Jesus welcomes us for who we are, and where we are at. Jesus comes to prepare a place for us. To invite us into a kingdom where hospitality is the core value everyone lives by.

John invites us to prepare our hearts so we will be able to hear Jesus invitation and teachings over the loud noises of distraction that often try to deter us.

As the church, we have created the season of Advent to help us turn our hearts to the manger where Jesus lies with promises of love and hope for us and our world. To live with faith and hope in the promise that Jesus will come again to make everything right as we continue to endure during these uncertain times.

Through prayer. Through hearing and dwelling on the word of God. Through worship. Through generosity to others. We turn our hearts to hear what Jesus has to say. And what Jesus says to us is “Welcome! Come to the place I have prepared for you.”

Let us pray, loving God prepare our hearts, minds, and bodies to hear your voice. Invite us into repentance when we get distracted. Thank you for your hospitality and hope that touches our lives in profound ways. Inspire us to reflect this hospitality and hope to the people we meet. In Jesus name we pray, **Amen.**

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