

Preparations

Schools in our area don't let out for vacation until the end of next week. School is still in session.

In one community, a new family in the neighborhood had been so busy with preparations for Christmas that one weekday morning, they overslept. The seven-year-old daughter missed her school bus. So her dad—even though he himself was late for work—had to drive her.

Because he wasn't yet familiar with the route, he needed her to give him directions to her school. After they'd gone several blocks, she told him to turn right. After a few more blocks, she had him take a left. This went on for twenty minutes. But when they finally arrived at the school, he realized it was only a short distance from their home. The father, rather annoyed, asked his little girl why she'd led him around in such a circle. The child explained, "That's the only way I know, Daddy. It's the way the school bus goes."

Can you relate? Do you sometimes feel as though you're going around your ankle to get to your elbow? Do you seem to

be going around in circles, never seeming to get anywhere? And does that feeling intensify at this time of year? With Christmas just twenty-one days away, holiday preparations are in full swing. You keep going and going, and you never seem to arrive at a sense of completion, a sense of serenity, a sense of peace.

But on this second Sunday of Advent, you've received a sabbath gift: a respite from all the activity going on in the world outside these walls. You've been drawn to this place to worship. To reflect. To decompress.

And then, all of a sudden, up pops John the Baptist. Right in front of you! It's as though he comes to life, steps out of the pages of the Gospel, and steps squarely into your path.

What if John actually showed up at church? Would he smile and say, "Good morning! Welcome to Jordan River United Methodist Church"? Probably not.

You might whisper to your neighbor in the pew: "Good grief! Why'd the Bishop send *him* here? A preacher in a camel's hair tunic? Whoever heard of such? They say he actually eats *locusts*. How bizarre! And that *sermon*! Didn't he

just call us a bunch of slithering *snakes*? Hey, don't you have a buddy on the Pastor Parish Relations Committee? Get her to call the District Superintendent and have this wild man appointed somewhere else!

This fiery young prophet named John is unexpected. He's intrusive. He doesn't calm our frazzled nerves or soothe our stressed-out spirits. So you won't see John's portrait on a Christmas card. You won't hear John's name in a holiday song at the mall or on the radio. John won't be featured in any of this season's TV specials or commercials. Because they're all about Santa and presents and glittering lights and festive gatherings of affluent families who never argue and children who are never naughty but always nice.

Year after year, you and I are presented with this idealized fantasy of Christmas. Year after year, we've tried to prepare for it. But as the years roll by, it becomes clearer and clearer that this consumer version of Christmas the world holds up before us doesn't really have too much to do with either the birth of Jesus Christ or with his coming again.

His two advents are what we hope for and prepare for in these weeks before Christmas. And one of the truths this season of Advent teaches us is that we just can't get to Christmas without being confronted by John the Baptist.

So, as we prepare, what do we do with John? Where are we in his message? And how does his message resonate in our lives?

Matthew invites you to picture the setting in your mind. Here's John out in the desert, in a stark and barren landscape relieved only by the wide, cool Jordan flowing through it. Thousands have flocked to him, coming to confess sins and be baptized. Some religious leaders and authorities are here as well. Skeptical. Suspicious! Giving John the once-over. Checking him out. Imagine yourself here at the Jordan—seeing John with your own eyes, hearing him with your own ears.

Being in his charismatic presence. In the power and the spirit of Elijah, John comes. The last of Israel's great prophets. Here at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, John's our segue,

our transition from the Hebrew Scriptures into the New Testament.

In the wilderness, linking past to future, John heralds the advent of another: *After me will come One who is more powerful than I.* John fulfills a long-ago prophecy when he thunders:

He's coming! Prepare for him! Make the way straight and smooth. He's coming soon!

John's words vibrate with intensity. With urgency. You get the sense that there's no time to waste. For at the center of John's message lies a call to repentance.

Repentance. Hmm. Some people might consider that word a bit old-fashioned, lacking relevance for our day and time. If we need to repent, doesn't it follow that we must have sinned? And wouldn't we rather think about having *made mistakes* than about having sinned? The word *repentance* may conjure up images of putting on sackcloth and ashes, as was the custom in biblical times. What does repentance mean in and for our lives today?

Does repentance mean saying sorry when we get caught? Does it mean apologizing and expressing remorse and throwing ourselves on the mercy of the court, hoping for a lighter sentence? Is that repentance?

Is repentance something we do when the going gets tough and somehow we get the idea that we did something to deserve it? Like when the test results come back positive? When the company hands out a pink slip? When a spouse utters the word *divorce*?

Is repentance something we do only in our services of worship, when together we offer a prayer of confession? And then feel okay with forgetting all about repentance until the next Sunday?

Or is repentance something that happens in our hearts? In the original Greek, the word that gets translated as *repentance* actually means *turning*. But it's a turning that doesn't happen overnight. Repentance is a continuing process of turning from the old way of life—life in the world's brokenness—and turning back to God whose desire is for wholeness. Repentance means that the metaphorical axe John's preaching

about gets used to chop away bitterness and envy, prejudice and pride. Repentance means that the deadwood within gets cut away. Repentance is the first step in your preparation and mine—the first step in preparation for the One who's coming.

Repentance is about contrition for the former way of life. But it's also about much more than that. It's about feeling your heart overflow with joyous gratitude for the transformation God is working in you. Transformation into newness.

For John the Baptist insists that there's a new way, a better way to live. And in today's first reading, Isaiah shows us that way. Sketches it out for us. Perhaps when we first glimpse Isaiah's vision, it's difficult for us to process. Because in the world around us, other sights fill our eyes and other sounds fill our ears. We see aggression and brutality. We hear the sounds of suffering and weeping. Sometimes it seems as though this sin-sick old world holds no more hope, no more vitality than a dried-up, lifeless stump.

But then we learn that out from this stump—in accordance with God's eternal purposes and God's perfect will—out from this stump has grown a living shoot. A branch of

Jesse's tree. His judgment is rooted in righteousness. He is himself God's own Word. And God's word is more powerful than all the doubt and despair, all the destruction and devastation that seem to pervade this world.

A world we know is being changed by God's Word!

For today we hear God's promise to *all* creatures—both human and animal—that they will be led by One who comes as a little child. This One is a diametrically different way of being in the world. This One is a radical way of living. This One is, himself, the way.

His way is to hear the cries of the needy. His way is to care for the hurting. His way is to bind up the brokenhearted. His way is to establish justice for the poor and the oppressed. And he calls his followers—you and me—to do the same.

Because we are baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This One who has come and who is to come has ignited within us Spirit-fire, the fire of life in his kingdom, the kingdom that draws near when you and I take part in preparing the way for his coming.

So make your preparations. Welcome a stranger. Feed a hungry person. Comfort the grieving. Embrace a lonely one. Befriend the friendless. Make a difference in the life of a child. When John talks about bearing fruit worthy of repentance, he means that if you've turned—if you're truly changed on the inside—that will be made apparent by what you *do*. In preparing the way for the coming One.

Of all the preparations you and I have to make during these weeks of Advent, of all the ways you and I have of getting ready for Christmas, this is the best way of all. Prepare, beloved, to receive the One who offers himself to you at his table today, the One who is coming to dwell in you and with you—always and forever.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.