Lawrence Park Community Church

December 2, 2018

A sermon for the Season of Advent

“Preparing The Way”

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 3 - 5 & Mark 1: 1 – 8

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Today we have entered the season of Advent. The choir led us in the familiar hymn “O Come, O come Emmanuel” that, in its original context, served as a plea by the people of Israel centuries ago for a saviour to liberate them from their captive foes. It has become the traditional hymn to commence this time of anticipation and waiting and on this first Sunday of Advent the focus gift is hope. This morning the symbolic hope candle creates a glow around the church world. The predictable church seasons come upon us before we can adjust our thinking to their meaning and opportunity. We are mindful that Advent can coincide with an anxiety producing “to do” list of gifts to buy, events to attend, and the many expectations to meet. Celebration can be overtaken with weariness and the coming of Jesus can pass as an incidental event.

The challenge of this season is to bring new understanding to its message. This is what we share in common because we all look for inspiration from a story that commences with an ordinary birth that, several decades later, was recorded by two gospel writers as an extraordinary birth. The latter bells and whistles editions captured our imagination as children and continues to do so into adulthood. Sufficient to say that two thousand years has passed and the name of Jesus never ceases to be that which draws us to this place of worship. The substance and integrity of his life remains the *Way,* a model of authentic living worthy of emulating.

Sandra read to us the prophetic words from Isaiah chapter 40. Words that are beautifully woven into Handel’s monumental *Messiah.* This morning we will hear two excerpts by the choir from this inspiring oratorio. Isaiah, a visionary, speaks to an exiled people who were confronted with insurmountable difficulties and conditions. To them it appears impossible that they can be set free, much less restored to their homeland and national independence. But the role of prophecy was to instill hope and remind people of the ultimate revelation of God in history. Isaiah’s words were offered as encouragement to an oppressed people. Equally important to note in Isaiah’s prophecy is the matter of advance preparation…that is the need expressed in metaphorical terms to prepare for the One who comes by making a straight way, a highway for God, where the uneven ground becomes level and the rough places plain. Isaiah speaks of a victorious God who will rescue the people from captivity. I would like you to keep this prophecy and its context in your minds as we move to today’s second reading from the Gospel according to Mark.

This gospel was the first gospel to be written three or four decades after Jesus’ death. It is noteworthy that the author does not record anything concerning Jesus’ birth. Rather the gospel commences thirty plus years later with the coming of John the Baptist as the herald for the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry.

I find it imaginative that the author of Mark uses a prophecy from 700 years before the birth of Jesus, to herald the coming of Jesus. Having said this, what better passage to remind us today in this season of waiting and watching, that we too need to prepare for his coming. Hope is a continuous theme throughout biblical history. It is in a real sense a necessary coping strategy for life when we chose hope over despair. Given the troubling conditions in our world today, hope, as a mind set is the only option.

Taking the idea of prophecy one step further, what we have in the opening verses of Mark are the words of Isaiah used this time to introduce the person of John the Baptist. Let us pause to take a look at the character of John. In doing so, I want you to imagine that John showed up here at Lawrence Park Church this morning. If so, let me pose three questions for all of us: “What would be our response to his appearance?” “How will we respond to his message?” and “What lessons might we learn from him?”

Well let me give you my take. First of all, if a scantily dressed and seemingly unkempt man showed up at the church door, we might find him a warm coat and suggest to him that he check in with Blythwood Baptist Church on an “Out of the Cold” night. Our society, including the church, doesn’t do well with radical appearances and behaviours. Second, John’s narrative calling for a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins would probably be seen as somewhat off the wall.

How we would respond to John’s message is another open question. I suspect that John wouldn’t receive much attention beyond a casual recognition, not unlike that of a person at a modern day sport’s event who holds up a sign for the TV cameras on which is written *John 3:16*. And so in fairness to ourselves, and in order to answer the question, we need to use our imagination and place John’s message in the context of his role, that of a herald carrying the banner, for the coming of Jesus. The advance point man we might say. “Prepare the way of the Lord,” declares John!

Stretching the imagination a little further, if indeed Jesus himself showed up here at Lawrence Park this morning and we had just a little advance warning, we would pull out all the stops…arrange for a welcoming party...someone will emerge as the first person to shake his hand. Others less visible will be preparing a banquet down in the kitchen. Someone will be making sure that, from a public relations perspective, we invite the media to capture Jesus’ arrival, and perhaps John Suk will give Jesus his parking space! I suspect that everyone may be rather anxious to get a good seat. Well, as facetious as that may sound, we do need to step back and realize that the reception of the person of Jesus does not require a welcoming party or an orchestrated and choreographed response as was announced in the prophetic words of Isaiah, and later used by the author of Mark to introduce Jesus’ ministry. Rather, the need for readiness, which the words suggest, is very much a *personal* readiness. Isaiah’s audience hoped and longed for a liberator from their oppressors and a return to their country. The audience listening to the same words seven hundred years later was in a similar predicament, that of being under Roman rule and oppression. Let me go one step further and suggest that in a similar attitude of longing, the chaos and injustice in our world today calls for a liberator from the tyranny in its many forms that is the plight of millions. Such liberation would be welcome if experienced as a full restoration of human rights, common decency, and a full commitment to the rule of law.

And so we see how gospel writers made effective use of the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophetic words do not call us to prepare an infrastructure of roads and highways. These are simply symbols or metaphors prompting us to look within our own hearts and minds, and to smooth out the rough places in our lives to make our internal paths straight. Perhaps we need to turn from those things which hinder our relationship with God and others, and to restore those strained and broken relationships we experience so that there can be healing and wholeness, not just for ourselves, but for those with whom we are in relationship. This I believe is the true and meaningful Advent message. Hence the required preparation calls us to take stock of our lives, looking within where only we are able to probe with truth and openness.

For me, John the Baptist teaches the importance of playing a supporting role. Not only was he courageous, but also showed us how to put personal ambition aside and truly promote the One who was to come after him. John had a tremendous following himself and could easily have manipulated his followers for purposes of self-aggrandizement. Quite the contrary, John made it clear that whereas he baptized with water, the One to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. It was almost as if to say, “Just wait, you haven’t seen anything yet!”

In practice, it is not always easy to play a supporting role. Being human means that we have a need for acknowledgment, a pat on the shoulder, some more than others. It is human nature to hope for a brief moment of glory. Some people are born leaders and others are authentic followers. I use the term *authentic* because, unfortunately, sometimes true followers are stigmatized as those who follow aimlessly whatever drift is happening, never wanting to take a personal stand. Whereas there are such folks, there are also those who are comfortable in a supporting role. A tremendous responsibility is placed on those who do lead and assume responsibility in our world in whatever arena they serve. Accountability to those who are being led must be paramount. Something that is sadly lacking by some world leaders today. Personal ambition and agenda must never trespass on this sacred trust. John the Baptist, who had an established ministry, had every conceivable opportunity to achieve personal gain and, to use a modern idiom, attain *celebrity status*, but he chose to play a secondary and supportive role. We might do well to follow his example in whatever endeavour we find ourselves, whether as leader or follower.

Today we begin the watching and waiting within the meaning and the spirit of this Advent season. We have been reminded to prepare and be ready for his coming . . . to make room for him at the inn of our hearts. That doesn’t give rise to bells and whistles and elaborate arrangements. It simply means that you and I prepare so that we can be free of those impediments that would otherwise hinder our ability to welcome him into our very being. Amen.