
Prepare to Pare Down

The Rev. Canon Elizabeth C. Knowlton
The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia
December 7, 2008
Mark 1:1-8

It was September 1, 1995. I rose after Ron went off to work, got my cup of decaffeinated tea, and sat on the couch to watch the news. I was home on leave as I had been for the past two weeks. It had been a time of puttering around the house. The weather had been so hot the only place I was comfortable seemed to be a movie theater, so I had seen quite a few movies. Our house was on the market as our new house was being built, so there had been plenty of domestic tasks to keep me engaged. There was always vacuuming and straightening to be done.

My favorite activity during that time, however, was going into the newly decorated space in our house. It was full of brightly colored jungle animals, a new crib, and the tiniest clothes I'd ever seen in yellow and green. It contained a generous plenty of gadgetry that I could only begin to guess at its use. A mechanical swing stood empty and assembled. My new glider was at the ready for nighttime occupation and I loved to sit there and wonder. Who was this new person who was going to come into our life? How were our lives going to change?

A little later that day, I started to feel some tightening around my belly in fairly regular intervals. It didn't hurt, so I wondered whether this was the beginning of "something" or just a false alarm. Strangely, I was not worried. I just waited the day out. By the time Ron got home from work I was pretty sure I was in labor, but the contractions were still far apart and so we did what we often did on a Friday night. We went to the movies.

I had not yet said anything to Ron. This is strange in retrospect. Anyone who knows me can tell you I rarely have a private thought. I'm not sure why I waited, but I wanted to be sure this was the real thing before we headed to the hospital. I was also probably being stubborn since it was my due date. He'd been teasing me from the beginning that the baby would come exactly on the due date, a Friday, to give us the full benefit of the Labor Day weekend holiday. But, mostly I think I felt protective of the process. It seemed precious and delicate. It wasn't quite ready for a name.

After we emerged from watching the movie that evening, I said to Ron, "I hope you're not tired tonight, I think we're going to have a long one." At 11:10 a.m. the next morning, all of our waiting and time for preparation was over and we gazed into the eyes of our daughter. It was a new beginning.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

We often hear that Advent is a time of preparation. But to prepare the way of the Lord is not the same as preparing for the holidays, at least in the way the culture seems to pressure us. Getting ready for the holidays has all feel of taking an already busy life and ratcheting it up several notches. We prepare extra food, we prepare our houses to receive extra company, we prepare to attend annual parties and gatherings, we prepare lists of gifts to buy; and prepare to deal with extra traffic and shopping, punctuated by periodic holiday lattes to

keep us going.

There is an extra anxiety this season. It is the message that in addition to holiday preparations, we should be preparing for the worst. The financial advisors remind us that we should have 6-9 months of living expenses set aside and a plan to eliminate all of our credit card debt. Our jobs are at risk, the economy is in trouble and in addition to preparing for the holidays, we need to prepare for the reality of an economic downturn, ongoing government bailouts, and a world where acts of violence and unrest are the norm. We need to prepare.

But the more we prepare for this life, the heavier the world feels. There is no way to describe this as "the beginning of good news." It is the calm before the storm at best. We need to hear the call of John the Baptist this morning, perhaps more than ever. He is calling us out into the desert.

We need some time in the wilderness to reassess and take stock. We need to be reminded of who we are, what we are waiting for, and how we can prepare. The desert has the blessing of being a place where preparation not about adding and assembling, but is about stripping away. And John the Baptist reminds us that we need to be invited to turn in that direction.

We are not likely to automatically find the desert in the midst of endless renditions of the Little Drummer Boy or the 24hr news cycle. No, we need to seek the desert pretty intentionally amidst the cacophony we call our daily lives.

How do we prepare the way of the Lord? The word prepare has as its root, to pare. It means to trim by cutting close or to make ready.

It generally is thought of as reducing something little by little. It is a wonderful image for Advent. I can do something little by little. I am not likely to change everything over night. Each of us can choose one small thing each day to help us pare down and create space to receive the Christ child. Our sojourn to the desert can happen here and now, before we take vacation or the kids are out of school.

We can take some extra time in the morning before we go to work or run my errands for quiet. We can drop some extra clothes off to donate as I make my way to the mall. We can give to charity in someone's name rather than buying them something they don't want or need. I can still decorate my house, but maybe not every box of decorations needs to journey out of the basement this year. Maybe meeting some friends for a quiet lunch can replace the annual expansive dinner party.

Little by little we can bring the gifts of the desert to our hectic lives. This turn, even the smallest gesture is the repentance that John the baptist is calling us to. Remember he says what you really are preparing for. God has come, is here, and will come again. Wait with me. Look with me.

This is the good news and it is only the beginning. The gospel of Mark doesn't claim to have all of the good news, but tells us we are now invited to be part of its ongoing story. Each and every one of us has our own contribution to make. You are the good news as well and you have been since the day of your birth. When you smile at a stressed out sales clerk, or give a friend some uninterrupted time, you are being good news. You are helping someone to have a new beginning.

There are those around you who remind you of this. They are your John the Baptists. They may not wear wild clothing, but they are helping you to turn. To turn towards God. To simplify and pare down. The way of the Lord is all around us. We only need to turn and look. We need only begin again. The good news is always beginning and if we slip into worry and fear, it is ok. We little by little, day by day, moment by moment, begin again.

As I think back on my pregnancy, I am struck that those two weeks of waiting were probably the most precious moments I had during my nine months. They were also probably the most important days of preparation. Things were wrapped up at work, I was not overwhelmed with tasks, and I had absolutely no control as to when the baby was going to come. I had time to wonder and that created space. Reading the how to manuals and buying all the stuff, was in no way a preparation for looking in to our daughter's eyes for the first time.

Sitting on the glider and wondering was much better preparation for that. What are you preparing for? What new life is God bringing about in you? This Advent, spend some time in whatever is your glider and wonder. What is the good news that is just beginning? Prepare the way of the Lord, listen to his messengers. They are calling. Do we have ears to hear?

Amen.

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip*. All rights reserved.