

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A messenger is crying out from the wilderness, a singular voice saying prepare. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Lift the valleys and make low the mountains and hills. Make level the uneven ground, the rough places plain. Prepare the voice calls out. With wild locusts and honey staining his camel's hair, prepare he cries. Prepare for he who is more powerful than I is coming. Prepare, for He is coming. In the season of advent we are called into a time of preparation and anticipation as we await the coming (again) of Jesus Christ. John comes crashing out of the wilderness today to call to Jerusalem and awaken them to their need to prepare for the coming of one who will baptize by the Holy Spirit. And we are faced with a challenge, a question, are we Jerusalem, heeding the call of John to prepare the way of the Lord, or are we John, crying out from the wilderness, crying out with no authority but that which we have as believers in God, and now today as followers of Christ.

The role of the messenger is vital to this season of Advent. We spend time each year with this messenger of God known as John, crying out from the wilderness, crying out to Jerusalem, encouraging, nearly berating, them, into preparing for the coming of the next one. As we approach Christmas we will hear of other messengers of God sharing joyful, and terrifying, news. The role of messenger being a vital piece of this story as we prepare for Christ, and a role that holds much more for us than a simple vehicle through which we learn of the power and authority that is to come in Christ. We need to consider in this season of advent, a season where we focus so heavily on preparation, on anticipation, on the arrival of Christ, what this role of messenger means for us today.

Are we the ones that need to make the path straight?

Or, are we the ones that raise the fact that it is crooked to begin with?

The dichotomy of this season of advent (that Christ has not yet arrived, and yet has already died and resurrected for us) often leaves us with a bit of forgetfulness that this is not a time of year set aside for quiet contemplation and withdrawal from the world. It can be easy to give into that tendency with the craziness that goes on during this time of year. Family obligations, work parties, church pageants, extra choir practices, shopping, cooking, cleaning, all take time from us to simply prepare for the arrival of Christ. And, because of this, we often want to retreat into silence, to enjoy the beauty of the moment, to behold. But what if instead we are called to be like John crying out from the wilderness, we are called to be messengers, we are called to stand against the general order of the day and inspire the masses to prepare themselves for one who is more powerful to come.

John then becomes for us a model of how we should be preparing, how we should be living into anticipation in this season of advent, with intensity, with passion, with a message that must be heard, with the sense that the world is broken and we can help prepare this world to be healed by the one who is to come.

And, it is pretty clear that this world is broken. Hate no longer exists in our world because that would imply the possibility of viewing the other as worthy of our emotional energy. Instead we have dehumanized anyone who disagrees with us. Instead we dismiss those who challenge our worldview as any choice number of descriptive expletives. Instead we double down on messages that prop up our own that by their very nature strip away any agency that others may have, that strip away any feeling that we may have a

connection to others who are not like us, that strip away any sense that diversity in this world is to be celebrated and embraced for that would imply that thinking other than our own may be valid. And, this thinking no longer represents the fringes, the wilderness proclaimers on the edge. This is the thinking of the mainstream. Of the leadership and authority of our time. Of our very culture.

So, what do we do with this reality in our present day and age?

Cry out!

And what shall we cry?

A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins would not be a bad place to start.

If we live into the role of messenger, if we begin to cry out from the wilderness as a living into of our preparation, we will also begin to see the things that we must do in order to see the paths made straight. Before this service I was with a number of parishioners of St. John's as we talked about what it will look like for St. John's to do the work of mission and outreach in the future. An important takeaway from that conversation is we can't simply continue to do what we've always done and assume that will continue to work. First off, it's already proven that it can't and won't long term. Too often we have the same handful of people invested in a ministry, eventually taking on all of the responsibilities, burning out from having to do most of the work by themselves, and that ministry petering out. This is not because the ministry is unimportant but because for too long the attitude at St. John's has been two-fold, either a) other people are doing the work so I don't need to or b) I'm the only one who knows how to do this work so we don't need any new people getting involved. It's almost as if our attitudes to how ministry is done at St. John's has

become a tradition, and it is a tradition that continually fails to live into the reality that we are all called to be messengers, that we are called to make clear the way, that we are all called to cry out against the world.

Tradition will be the death of the Episcopal Church, of St. John's Cathedral, if we let it. And, what is the point of our traditions if we are never allowed to question them, never allowed to ask what are we getting out of them. Tradition for the sake of tradition is not a form of preparation or anticipation. Tradition for the sake of tradition is a way to make the valleys deeper and the mountains higher. And, I say this as someone who loves tradition, particularly at this time of year. But, it is important for us to ask questions of ourselves, to ask how are traditions serve us, and if they serve a larger purpose, if they help us in our goal to be the messengers crying out from the wilderness in a time such as now, if they help us prepare the way, to live into our joyous anticipation. Or, do they hold us back. Do they turn people away from us. Do they keep us entrenched in a system or understanding of the world that is firmly planted 20 or 30 or 50 years ago. It is when our traditions become barriers to making straight the path, of preparing the way of the Lord, of being messengers of God for the here and now, that we must ask that if we are called to be those messengers crying out from the wilderness, how can we do that when we are stuck (often by choice) in the hierarchy of man-made systems.

As John cries out from the wilderness, we too are called to be the messengers for this day and age, messengers for a time when the world is truly broken, messengers for a time when the world truly needs the message that Christ is coming (again) for all. And, we must be emboldened by the fact that we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. For being

baptized by the Holy Spirit means that throughout our times of preparation and anticipation, we do so with the presence of the Holy Spirit with us, always. This time of preparation and anticipation cannot turn into a season of simply waiting. We have the Holy Spirit with us, so it is up to us to make straight the paths, to cry out, to awaken the people that Christ is soon coming, for the first time and again. The season of advent is a season of action that we must live into through the example of John. The season of advent is a season of action that we must live into through the example of Mary. The season of advent is a season of action, for preparing requires us to take action, requires us to look inwardly and ask ourselves if we truly are making the path straight and clear or are we putting barriers between us, between others, and the joyful experience of the holy arriving on Christmas Day.

So, what do we do with the reality of this world that we face each day?

Cry out!

And what shall we cry?

The tradition of being the messenger. Of spreading the Good News of Christ that is for all. Of seeing the other and knowing that the path is made for them too. Of living into a season of preparation and anticipation whose payoff is as much about the arrival of a baby child as it is about what we do with the knowledge that this is going to happen and we should darn well get ready for it. Make the paths straight. Lift the valleys and make low the mountains and hills. Make level the uneven ground, the rough places plain. And most importantly, prepare.

Amen.