**Waiting for Emmanuel: Be Prepared**

**Mark 1:1-8**

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If you were to draw your spiritual journey, your journey of faith, what would it look like?  Would you start with your birth or your baptism or your childhood or some other point in your life when consciously you decided that this was a journey you wanted to take?  And then consider what the journey has been like - has it been a pretty straight path?  Or have there been a lot of curves in the road?  How about obstacles?  Have you encountered ruts and potholes?  How about rocks that break your windshield or boulders that block the way?  How has the weather been?  Sunny?  Periods of fog?  Maybe the occasional slippery spot on the road?

My guess is that for many of us, the journey has looked something like this. (show photo)  For others, maybe this is a better depiction. (show photo)  By the time we reach middle adulthood, I’d say that very few of us could describe a path that looks like this (show photo).

And that just makes sense.  Lots of things challenge us as we work toward a concept and understanding of God that fits for us.  And while it’s easy to have good intentions about living a faithful life, actually living out those intentions - being the people God calls us to be - is much harder.  There are so many ways we can get derailed - mistakes that we make, unexpected crises, painful losses - all of these can interfere with growing in faith.

Of course, we are human, and so these twists and turns and obstacles are inevitable - just as they were for the people of Judah some 2000 years ago.  Two thousand years ago, when a wild prophet named John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness, exhorting people to prepare the way of the Lord.  John was the prophet that Isaiah foretold, and he called people into the wilderness, telling them to make a straight highway for God, to repent of their sins and be baptized.

Obviously, John gets it - he understands that our spiritual journeys are not always straight.  That we meander and turn the wrong way and get lost and trip on the stones in the road.  And he understands that every once in awhile, we need to stop and look around, see where we are, look toward the horizon to see where we are going, and recalibrate, straighten our path, get back on the road we feel God calling us to.  John understands a lot - usually more than we do.

And that’s the thing about prophets.   More often than not, they see things we don’t want to see, they understand things we’d rather not understand.  Prophesying is risky business.  John ended up with his head on a platter.  Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ended up with a bullet in his head.  Prophets frighten us because they make us open our eyes and they call us to change.

So, here is John, speaking to us on the second Sunday of Advent, and at least some of us are not going to like what he’s saying because he’s telling us that if we are going to prepare for the coming of Christ, prepare our hearts for Jesus’ birth, we need to honestly look at our lives and consider what is standing between us and God.

This Advent we are in the midst of a sermon series called “Waiting for Emmanuel”.  We know that Advent is a season of waiting and so we are exploring what it means to wait well, to be intentional in our waiting.  Last week, we talked about keeping awake.  This week we’ll talk about the challenge of faithful preparation.

For the most part, this is a church, and we are a denomination, that doesn’t place a huge emphasis on sin, repentance from sin, forgiveness of sin.  We have many in our congregation who grew up in churches that focused on humanity’s sinful nature, on guilt and self-abnegation.  That sort of theology can leave people feeling worthless or angry or ashamed.  And while the suffering of Christ at the hands of human sinfulness is certainly part of the Christian story, as a rule, we tend to focus more on His resurrection and the abundant life that is ours when we embrace the hope and transformation His resurrection offers us.

That’s all a long-winded way of saying we don’t do a lot of confessing of sins in our church, and we certainly don’t make confession a requirement for being part of this church community.  In fact, it is an acknowledgment that for some among us, the whole language around sin is very uncomfortable.  With that being said, we can’t ignore that these are John’s words.  We prepare for Jesus’ birth by recognizing our mistakes and returning to the journey of faith that brings us closer to God.

For John - just like the Boy Scouts - it’s all about preparation.   And, in part, that means to repent, to turn back to God, and to ask forgiveness for our sins.

Since sin is a word we often avoid, maybe it makes sense to talk for a minute about what sin is.  Sin is whatever we do that interferes with our relationship with God.  Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.  If we do these things, we will be in right relationship with God. In these weeks of waiting, we stand at a crossroads of the past, the present, and the future.  Advent is a time to look at where we have been spiritually, where we find ourselves at the moment, and where we believe God’s path might lead us.

So, here are some questions for thought.  As you think about your life, in what ways are you enacting your love for God?  What are you doing to grow to know God better?  How do you express love to others?  And then ...in what ways have you perhaps damaged your relationship with God?  How have you hurt God’s creation - the creation that is the earth and all that lives on earth but also the creation that is you?  What choices have you made that were self-defeating or self-destructive?  What choices have you made that were destructive to the environment or to another person - a friend, family member, colleague, or even total stranger?  Are you able, and willing, to ask God’s forgiveness or ask forgiveness of the person you’ve hurt?  Perhaps even harder, are you able and willing to begin forgiving yourself?  These are the questions that John asks us - the questions that can help us to see the horizon in front of us and make a straight path forward.

Now, there are a couple of caveats to that.  First of all, a straightened path can still lead through the wilderness.  After all, that’s where John appeared.  Even when you are in right relationship with God, you may still have a lot of questions and be frustrated by the lack of answers. There may still be a lot of unknowns.  That’s okay.  God is in the mystery.  Also, you will certainly not be spared from tests of faith that tempt you to leave the path all together.  Again, that’s okay - God is in the doubt and the fear, the grieving and the loss.  So, yes, even if we make our paths straight, we’ll still spend time in the wilderness.

And here is the other thing.  Even the most faithful of paths can lead to unexpected places and unexpected callings.   Look at John the Baptist - the man wore camel’s hair and ate locusts!  He was a wilderness man, a wild man, and if we met him today, we would be seriously concerned about his mental health.  Not only that, he was the child his parents never believed he would be born.  Not until they were past their child-bearing years were Zechariah and Elizabeth visited by an angel who announced that soon Elizabeth would give birth to a son they would name John.  Despite his late arrival, while every other messenger from God who appears in the Christmas story is an angel, God sends wild John to us, to proclaim the Good News, to tell us that the Messiah is coming and we need to be ready.

So, be prepared for the unexpected!  Who knows where God might lead you?  You might end up on a mission trip in Kenya or building a Habit House or leading a Bible Study.  You might end up changing careers or even heading off to seminary.  One thing we can be sure of is that the faith journey we are on will never be boring, and God will use the gifts we have if we offer ourselves humbly and authentically to God.

We know that, ultimately, the path we are on during this Advent is going to lead to a manger in a stable. We just have to wait, and our task between now and then is to get ready.  Over the next few weeks, you’ll spend a lot of time preparing your house, your gifts, and your food.  Yet, the spiritual preparation we each must do is to prepare our hearts.  Prepare our hearts for the new life, the new beginning, offered to us by the new life born at Christmas. That newness of life, the promise that we are always able to begin again, to straighten our path, is at the heart of the Christmas story.  We can be redeemed, as can our world, through a baby soon to be born in Bethlehem.

Prepare the way of the Lord! Thanks be to God!  Amen.