Second Sunday of Advent

Rev. Dr. Jennifer L. Lazzuri

St. James Episcopal Church

***Preparing the Way***

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Isaiah 40: 1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

**Mark 1:1-8**

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” Psalm 19:14

***Preparing the Way for what is to Come***

As a minister and a former chaplain I have performed my fair share of funerals. All sorts of funerals.

A by-product of doing many funerals is being exposed to many different funeral homes, and I have formed opinions of various funeral homes along the way.

One funeral home that stands apart in my mind is Storke Funeral Home in Bowling Green, Virginia. David Storke is the owner and a friend. I did call and ask David if it would be alright for me to share this story before I share it with you this morning.

David and his team do exemplary work. He provides seamless funerals and has spent time assuring that all of the seemingly little or insignificant things are handled with class and dignity. We have heard the phrase “it is in the details” - and it is in the details.

There is a story that I remembered that David had shared with me that exemplifies the kind of work I am speaking of. There was a man who worked for David many years ago, Gordon Smithers. During funerals, Gordon did what David told him to do. One day, at a funeral they were assisting in Warsaw, Virginia, in a small older church, David had told Gordon to unlatch the back of the church doors when he signaled to him. When the time came, David gave his signal. The men at the front of the church began to move the casket from the front of the church to the back. David and the ushers were in motion, and poor Gordon - the latch was stuck and he couldn’t get it open. Gordon who didn’t want to disappoint and could see the casket coming, yanked and yanked in desperation, at the last moment the latch gave way, opening, breaking and pulling down much of the trim and woodwork of this old door with it. The door was opened as the casket arrived and they seamlessly went through, never missing a beat. The door was broken, and they would have to pay to fix it, but the family was none-the wiser. Gordon did what was asked of him - to prepare the way for the casket.

David shared this story laughing, “Gordon was the kind of person you always wanted to be around, “often in error but never in doubt.” He did what needed to be done. The beauty of this story lies in: 1. The love, care and respect these men had for each other and 2. In the importance of the understanding they had as a team of “doing it right”, making it appear seamless for the bereaved family, and each man making sure they did their part.

As a minister, these are the funeral guys I want to work with. Those who are aware of the needs of the families and do their part, so I, as a minister, can come and do my part.

Parts are important.

Today we begin the 2nd week of Advent. Advent is a story. A story of the time of preparation for THE story - the birth of Christ. We are all aware of and anticipating Christmas Day, the birth of the Christ child.

Today’s Gospel text shares the urgent exhortation to John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Lord, make paths straight for him. John is often referred to as the forerunner of Christ. Forerunners are often unseen figures and unsung. The details of their lives are under-imagined and undervalued. They plow the ground, destabilize the terrain, and make ready for change that is to come.

John’s job was to make a way for Christ to come. His grown life was spent speaking to crowds and baptizing and letting the people know that while he baptized with water, someone was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John’s life was not glamorous. He was described as clothed in camel’s hair and leather, and he ate locusts and wild honey. Today’s biblical scene was set in the wilderness. John’s voice is described as the “voice of a messenger, crying in the wilderness.” The most common reference to wilderness in the Hebrew Scriptures is to Mount Sinai, where the Israelites wandered for 40 years.

Wildernesses’ aren’t necessarily places that you want to be, they are wild and unruly, daunting. Danger can lurk there. You may find yourself afraid. Theologian Delores Williams offers a different version of the wilderness. Rather than a place to be feared, Williams reinterprets wilderness through the lens of the biblical Hagar where she found replenishment in the wilderness: ‘wilderness is a lens of struggle and Spirit, both problematic and promising.’ [[1]](#footnote-2)

It is in the wild places, in our seeming wildernesses’, that our faith can be formed, strengthened, cultivated. Even if it is hard. Because it is hard. Luke 1:80 tells us in speaking of John the Baptist, he grew up and his spirit grew strong. And he lived in the desert until the day he appeared openly to Israel.

John the Baptist is found all over Advent. He is a crying out loud preacher. A make-straight-the-way-that-which-has- been- crooked preacher. He is not introverted and unassuming. John is aware that it is time to make a way for the Lord. We know John’s life doesn’t end well from a human perspective. He was beheaded. (Mark 6:2)

The journey of forerunners has risk and consequence.

And crying out in the wilderness? Who is going to hear you in the wilderness? Wilderness implies aloneness and that no one is listening.

John never seemed to question his value or the need for his presence. John was to “make straight paths” and “to prepare the way”. He did what he was born to do. And he upset a lot of people.

The necessity of those who are antecedents of change, those who set the stage for an alternative future should not be undervalued.

Forerunners just do what needs to be done, whatever that might mean, even it it means breaking a door unwittingly to get a casket through.

Preparing a way, may mean chopping away at what before seemed essential to make a way for the new, the even more important. Chopping can hurt, but can prepare a way for the presence and power of life itself.

John was sent to prepare the way.

Preparing a way for what is to come implies that there is something that is to come. In the Advent story, it is the birth of Christ.

Mark begins his account not simply by saying that his work is “The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” but rather “The ***beginning of the good news***….” It’s so easy to be taken off guard by the brevity, even terseness of Mark’s opening line – no angels and shepherds here, no genealogies or hymns to God’s eternal Word – that we overlook it altogether. But I think Mark is trying to tell us something, both by the simplicity and open-ended quality of his opening.

I think Mark is suggesting that his whole story about Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist and running through the calling of his disciples, exercising demons, healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and culminating in his death and the declaration of his resurrection…is all just the beginning.

The story of the good news of Jesus Christ, that is, and continues to this day and among our people.

This is an important word for today and during this season of Advent.

We need to be reminded that God is still with us, working through us, continuing the story of good news.

God is not done. We are not yet what we have been called to be. The promise of Christmas is bigger than we’d imagined. And God’s mercy and courage and blessing extends farther and deeper than we can imagine. But I do encourage you to begin imagining.

So how do we today, prepare the way for Jesus?

We must prepare a way in our own hearts first.

May we hear and see the value of those who pave the way. May we reflect upon the contributions of those who made ways for us. May we honor, support and appreciate them. For those who are trail blazers and who speak the truth in the wilderness - may we pause in gratitude.

What must we do to prepare a way in our hearts for Jesus this season? What things need to be removed in us, in our community, in our congregation, in the world to “prepare the way? What things may need to be added? What is our part?

Lord, we ask for courage. And we thank you that you are coming. Even so, Lord Jesus, come.

Amen.

1. Working Preacher, December 6, 2020, Commentary on Mark 1:1-8, Courtney V. Buggs [↑](#footnote-ref-2)