

## **Advent II   Year A   Christ Church, Sparta**

Prepare the way of the Lord. Wait for his arrival. This is Advent.

We prepare a way for the Lord, and then we wait once again for Christmas morning to dawn.

Most of us begin Advent by driving all over town in search of the perfect Christmas tree. Somehow, we manage to tie all nine feet of branches on top of a seven-foot car, bring it home, string a thousand bright lights over sap-laden limbs, and cover it with dozens of ornaments.

After the tree is decorated, we spend our weekends shopping—going in and out of stores or staring at some screen as we shop online—trying to find the perfect gift for everyone on our list. In our spare time, we'll plan parties, hire caterers, and entertain neighbors and colleagues. We take the children

to *The Nutcracker* on Friday night and listen to Handel's *Messiah* on Sunday afternoon.

This is how the world teaches us to prepare for Christmas. This, it says, is Advent.

Our churches are preparing, too. From small country chapels to great cathedrals, everyone is getting ready. Bright red poinsettias have been ordered in honor and memory of loved ones. Wooden crèches come out of storage and find their places in narthexes and parish halls. Candles—three purple, one pink, and one white—stand ready to count down the weeks until the Savior's birth. Special music is chosen; musicians are secured.

There—our preparations complete. This is Advent.

Everything seems well organized. Our homes are ready. Our churches are ready.

But today, our festive feelings come to a halt as we find ourselves face-to-face with a man clothed in camel's hair,

announcing a message that cuts through all our holiday sentiment:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Hypocrites are not welcome. Curious spectators need not bother. Prestigious pedigrees mean nothing. Those bearing good fruit will be baptized; those bearing bad fruit will face an unquenchable fire.

John the Baptist appears, fulfilling the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah. The kingdom of God is drawing near. He is the voice crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.”

His message is not easy to swallow—especially in Matthew and Luke. It is one thing to be asked to repent; it is another to picture a crowd being called a “brood of vipers” or to imagine flames and judgment. Most of us would rather not think about the possibility of God’s wrath.

Fire is a powerful force. One morning last year, I woke to the aroma of pine—only to discover that I had left a scented candle burning through the night. Worse still, little pieces of pinecone were molded into its sides. It had been burning for over twelve hours. Our house could easily have gone up in flames.

We often associate fire with hell and damnation. The image is familiar: a devil in red, horns on his head, pitchfork in hand, stoking a fire meant to scare us away from sin.

But in our acclamation each Sunday, we say that Christ will come again—to be our judge. And the image I carry of that day is not one of destruction, but of transformation: a fire that melts and molds a sinner with the touch of the potter's hand.

Recently I came across a 15th-century painting of John the Baptist in the wilderness by Geertgen tot Sint Jans. The wilderness is not dark or threatening. There is light everywhere. The trees are still, birds fly overhead, and animals graze peacefully. John sits beside a narrow stream, dressed in a long



robe. His head rests on his hand; his face is weary, almost troubled.

As I studied the painting, I wondered if this is how John truly looked. Is he doubting his ability to reach the crowds? Is he crafting his sermon on repentance? Is he wondering how to handle the Pharisees and Sadducees?

Or is this John after a long day of baptizing in the Jordan—his voice raspy from preaching, his feet wrinkled from the water, his heart wondering whether anyone will truly change? He appears to be wrestling with something deep within.

Beside him rests a small, bright white lamb. Its face is turned toward John with tenderness. It is close enough for him to touch, though John is looking away. The lamb is at peace while John seems anxious.

Could this lamb be the Lamb of God?

Could the painter be reminding us that in the end we have nothing to fear, because God's love and grace will prevail?

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.  
The Lamb is coming. Not to terrify us, but to save us.  
Not with a fire of destruction, but a fire of transformation—  
a fire that shapes us into disciples,  
a fire that calms our anxious souls,  
a fire that baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and with hope.

It is never too late to turn around. God does not give up on us.  
No matter where we are or what we have done, God's hand is  
upon us. God can wipe away our selfishness and sin and grow  
in us fruit worthy of repentance.

I, for one, am grateful for that fire—  
the fire that burns away the chaff,  
that sweeps clean the clutter of my mind,  
that touches my lips and allows me to speak and sing of God's  
glory.

We don't have to do anything to make December 25th arrive.  
Christmas will come whether we are ready or not, though we  
will still spend hours preparing for our traditions.

And we don't have to do anything to make Christ come again.

He will come, ready or not.

Still—we can prepare the way of the Lord.

We prepare for Christ's coming by turning away from the ways of the world and returning to the ways of Christ.

We prepare for Christ's coming by sharing his refining fire with others.

We prepare for Christ's coming by confessing our sins, repenting, and opening ourselves to the possibility of new life.

We prepare for Christ's coming by allowing his flame to touch us again, transforming us from the inside out.

We prepare for Christ's coming by entering the wilderness—so that we may remember God is with us.

The Lamb of God, our Savior, has been born.

Prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen.