

Advent is the season of preparing, and last Sunday I discussed that Advent begins at the end. Today we are at the beginning. Today we are at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when we hear Luke refer to John as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." Or, maybe, if this isn't the actual beginning of Jesus' ministry, it's the prelude, because over the next two weeks we will hear stories about John the Baptist and how those stories prepare us for Jesus.

John appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. For us, he is the fulfillment of the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

These words from Isaiah and the words that John proclaimed are reflective of God's overall reversal.

Over and over in Scripture God shows concern for those on the margins and for those whom society discards or intentionally abuses and silences. Widows, orphans, the poor, and the outcast, God is continually working to elevate and include those whom society won't.

Everything from Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed because they did not help the poor and needy, to Jesus touching and healing lepers and eating with sinners and tax collectors, to Paul lashing out at the Church in Corinth for ignoring the hungry, to the image of the end of days when it is those who fed, clothed, and cared for those in need who attain eternal life, all this and more shows God concerned with the less fortunate. We heard it in the Prayer of Hannah. We hear it in the Magnificat. It's in the words of Isaiah, and it's in the words of John the Baptist. If we truly believe and proclaim the good news of God in Scripture and in Jesus, then we should be working to follow God's example and call in caring for those whom God cares for.

Scripture is not a static document, although some people see it that way. Those who view Scripture as static often use it to oppress individuals and groups of people. If Scripture were static, we would still have slavery. If it were static, women would still be property and barred from speaking in church. If Scripture were static . . . well, you get the idea.

Scripture, though, is the living word of God. It is living and active. It contains the seeds of growth. It recounts the story of God's relationship with his people. And it is not something to which we passively listen and then forget. It should touch us, shape us, and lead us both into a deeper relationship with God and into living a life that reflects the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Advent is the season of preparation. We prepare for the already in our preparations for the birth of Christ as celebrated in Christmas. Whether that means putting up decorations, baking Christmas cookies, helping with yesterday's Surprise You Sale, reading daily devotions, lighting candles, or whatever, we are making preparations for the already.

We are also preparing for the not yet in the coming of Christ at the end of the age. That, though, is a more . . . fuzzy . . . thing to prepare for. Christmas always comes on December 25, but we don't have a date for the not yet. Christmas has certain things the we use to prepare, but we might not quite know how to prepare for the not yet. How do we prepare for an event promised but undefined?

For starters, we can recognize that Scripture is not static. Scripture is not a story with characters locked in time. Scripture is the living word of God which speaks to us today as it did, and as God did, to the people found within its pages.

What that means, then, is that the words of Isaiah as proclaimed in Scripture and lived out by John the Baptist are not meant solely for them. It means that those words are meant for us as well. It means that we are called to proclaim the message that Isaiah and John proclaimed.

It also means we are not only to proclaim it, but that we are to prepare for the coming of the Lord by living into those words and working to make them a reality.

We can prepare for the coming of the Lord by working for, and living into, God's reversal.

Every valley shall be filled. When people find themselves at low point in their lives – physical, spiritual, and mental valleys – we can work to fill those valleys with good things. We can work to ensure they aren't abandoned but supported and helped up.

Every mountain shall be made low. People face a variety of obstacles that can seem like mountains in their lives: everything from food insecurity to unemployment to housing crises and medical expenses. These are mountains which make the valleys seem even lower. How can we work to lower those mountains? How can we help reverse these issues and concerns to help manifest God's presence?

Raising valleys and lowering mountains just aren't metaphors for some spiritual pie-in-the-sky – these are real life concerns that God wants to eliminate. And we are the ones who need to do that work, because the living word of God is speaking to us today.

Finally, if we are preparing for the coming of Christ for only a few, we are missing what Christ is all about. The raising of valleys and lowering of mountains isn't for a select few, it's for everyone. Another way of saying that is, “liberty and justice for all.” Because when those valleys are raised and the mountains lowered, all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

In our preparation for the not yet, we need to remember that all means all. That is what we are preparing for – for the coming of Christ and the salvation of all.

May God's kingdom be manifest here on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.