

Date: December 6, 2015
 Scriptures: Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6
 Title: Welcoming the Lord Aright

How are you?

How many times a day do we hear this question
 and realize no one really wants an answer?

During Advent,

many Christians, ask themselves the same question.

They ask,

“Will he find me giving thanks
 and searching my hearts and life
 that I might welcome him aright?”

“Will he find me steadfastly preparing
 to welcome him anew?”

“Will he find me overcome
 with anger at the way life has turned out;
 or with fear about health
 or with doubt about everything,
 including my faith?”

We ask ourselves these questions
 and many more like them.

Unlike the ones we are asked day in and day out,
 we really want to know.

Advent comes ‘round every year
 regular as clockwork.

Every year, we light the four Advent candles,
 one blue, another blue, a pink, one last blue.

Every year, we hear the stories
 we have heard countless times before.

Every year,
 we sing the same Advent hymns.

Year after year, Advent rolls around
 bringing its particular rhythm, readings, and songs.

Yet, always we experience Advent differently,
 because every year we are different,
 and the world around us is different.

It is Advent’s predictability and stability,
 that allows us to do the work of the season ~
 to do the interior work we need to do

to greet the Christ-child
as God in the flesh.

In addition to being a season of waiting,
Advent is also a time of preparation.
This time of preparation
is first heralded by John the Baptist.
Long before Jesus' ministry begins,
John appears in the wilderness.
The last of Israel's great prophets,
he is born for one task and one task only.
Soon after his birth,
Zechariah, his father, sings of this task
as he holds him tenderly in his arms.
Zechariah says to his newborn son,
"You child, will be called
the prophet of the most high,
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,
to give his people knowledge of salvation
by forgiveness of their sins."
Zechariah sings of what God has told him ~
John is born to prepare God's people to prepare.

Scripture says,
"Train up a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not depart from it."
Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, John's mother,
do exactly that.
They train up John to believe
that his calling is to prepare the way of the Messiah.
So, in the fullness of time,
he embraces his call wholeheartedly,
without any reluctance or hesitation.
Like a thunderbolt,
John appears in the wilderness
wearing a garment of camels hair and a leather belt
and eating locusts and wild honey.
I doubt that's what his parents had in mind,
especially since Zechariah served as a priest
at the Temple in Jerusalem.

John appears and with a thunderous voice
cries out to the people,
“Prepare ye the way of the Lord!”

The people,
hearing of this new prophet God has raised up,
leave their cities and villages
and flock to him in the wilderness.

Long years have passed
since a prophet of God has spoken,
and they are beyond eager
to hear what he says.

Using the poetic language of Isaiah,
John cries out saying
“Make ready the path of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be lifted up
and every mountain and hill shall be brought low;
and the crooked shall become straight,
and the rough shall be smooth;
and all flesh shall see
the salvation of God.”
(Isaiah 40:3-5).

Here, John is not talking about building roads
nor is he advocating the use of big road machinery.
He’s talking about something in here (place hand on heart)
not something out there.
He’s urging us to take a hard look at ourselves,
to acknowledge the things we have done
that have wounded others and ourselves
and also the things we have left undone.

In other words, John is urging us
to do a fearless moral inventory.
Doing this inventory is an important first step,
but as vitally important as it is,
we cannot and must not stop there.

We also need to commit to repenting,
commit to turning away from
our life-sapping, death-dealing behaviors.

Every year, this time of year,

Advent invites us to reflect on the year
 that has just passed
 and then to repent ~
 to do those things
 that will enable us
 to live a more faithful,
 more joyful,
 more compassionate life.

The choice is always ours.

Yet, John tells us something

that can and should serve as a Catalyst for our action.

He tells us that always God reaches out to us

with forgiveness.

This forgiveness flows from

God's compassionate, loving heart

and seeks ". . . to deliver us from evil."

(Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, p.266)

We behold this compassionate,

forgiving love in the flesh

with the birth of the Christ-child,

the one for whom we wait and prepare in Advent.

When Paul writes his letter

to the church at Philippi,

he is sitting in a prison cell.

He is thinking of the little church

that has so graciously and generously supported his ministry

since he founded it

and also of the problems now confronting it.

He knows he must speak honestly

and also pastorally to them

if he is to help them overcome their problems,

Speak in a way that uses

both his knowledge of them

and his Christian understanding

if he is to help them turn away

from their problems

and turn toward God's life-giving possibility.

So, he writes them an Advent letter,

a letter that will prepare them

to turn toward Bethlehem once again.

Paul's letter models compassionate love.

{Tell of letter from Jane.}

Right off the bat he tells them,

“I thank God for you and joyfully pray for you all.”

What a healing balm it is to know

you are appreciated and joyfully prayed for.

After assuring them of his love,

Paul reassures them

that God is with them

working God's purposes out

among them and in them.

Then, once again he tells them,

“I hold you close,

you are in my heart,

for we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Finally, after repeated expressions of love and reassurance,

Paul shares what his prayer for them is.

He tells them,

“I pray that your love may overflow more and more

with the knowledge of Christ

and full moral insight

to help you determine what is best...” (Phillipians 1:9)

Paul wants these dear friends to live better,

to live more loving,

more compassionate,

more forgiving lives.

Love is always the starting point of a changed life.

Our love of God and of the one God sent

and God's love working in us

expands our understanding of Christ's identity

and his way in the world.

This radical, transcendent love enables us
to desire Christ,
to put on Christ,
and ultimately to grow into Christ,
who is the first born of the new creation.

Through this intimate, interactive relationship,
we come to know and experience
the "good life,"
the abundant life,
the most blessed life.

Love in the flesh came down on that first Christmas.

How can we welcome him aright?

By preparing for him each and every day,
not just the twenty or so days of Advent.

We welcome him
by opening ourselves to God's love
and letting that love overflow
our hearts and our lives.

We welcome him by conforming our lives ever more fully
to Christ's compassionate, loving forgiveness.

As we do, we discover to our great joy and amazement
that Christ comes every day
not just once a year. Amen.