

# Advent: A Wilderness Journey of Preparation

## First Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-18    Malachi 3:1-4  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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December 2, 2018

Have you ever made what you hoped would be an exceptionally healthy shake? You know, when you open up the refrigerator and start throwing every fruit and vegetable you can find into a blender, hit puree, and hope for the best. That's how this sermon feels to me. At a recent Worship & Music ministry team meeting we brainstormed so many interesting ideas in how to approach the season of Advent this year that I've just dumped them all into my brain and am hoping for the best.

Something particularly uncharacteristic was to intentionally rearrange the order of the assigned Gospel Readings for the four Sundays in Advent. Since we decided to have an overall focus on the theme of wilderness, we decided to start with the John the Baptist passage, which actually combined the readings traditionally for the second and third Sundays in Advent. To go along with that theme, it was decided that a different poem would be read each week when lighting the Advent Wreath in place of the traditional candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. And Cynthia Fox came up with the creative ideas to decorate the sanctuary in a way that can help us experience the theme of the wilderness. I'm sure you were wondering what was going on when you entered the sanctuary this morning. **We are going on a journey, a journey through the wilderness of Advent.**

When we think of a liturgical season that focuses on the theme of wilderness we naturally think of the Season of Lent. After all, Lent usually begins with the story of Jesus, following his baptism by John the Baptist, being led into the wilderness by the Spirit where he is tempted for forty days by Satan. But John the Baptist makes another appearance during the liturgical season of Advent each year. This time, the focus is on the message that he is preparing the way for the Messiah.

Seeing **Advent as a time of active preparation** is an important and central focus of this season, hence this morning's meaningful poem, *Prepare*. Historically, however, there is a deeper connection between Lent and Advent. It's something I want to invite us all to consider this year. I realize that Lent, the forty-day period set aside to prepare us for Easter, isn't something a lot of us strictly observe. But if you think one forty-day period of prayer, fasting, and helping others in need is a sacrifice, what if we did that three times a year?

It has been discovered that many **ancient Celtic monasteries had a custom of "Three Lents" during the year.** In addition to the forty days prior to Easter, the forty days before Christmas and the forty days before Transfiguration Sunday (in August) were also embraced as times for fasting and self-denial. What this means is that over the course

of the year, about 1/3 of the time, 120 days, would be devoted to such intentional simplicity and spiritual practices. We know this didn't catch on in the wider church because the official Season of Advent is shorter than forty days. But there are those who still follow the Celtic tradition of starting Advent in the middle of November, including some in our Celtic Circle here at the church.

Granted, we aren't monks and nuns. However, **perhaps we could all benefit from spending a bit more time in prayer as we prepare for Christmas this year. Perhaps we can be more intentional about helping those in need. Perhaps we could live a bit more simply.** We're not talking about a period of excessive austerity, but rather **a joyful time of letting go, and immersing ourselves in God's Sacred Presence.** So, here's four suggestions that I've shared with you in the past that you might want to make part of your Advent journey this year.

1. Do less.
2. Breathe more.
3. Adjust your expectations.
4. Focus on people, not stuff.
- 5.

Such spiritual practices, however, may indeed put us on a path that feels like wandering in the wilderness. After all, **John the Baptist's message is not an easy one for us to hear.** His crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, to quote the Old Testament prophet, is with a message that begins by calling the crowds who came to see him a bunch of snakes. His message is filled with the wrath of God that will come unless they **"bear fruits worthy of repentance"**.

Needless to say, the fearful and probably traumatized crowd rightly asks, **"What then should we do?"** John the Baptist's answer is fascinating, and one that has just as much merit today as it did back in the Judean wilderness. The answer: **an uncompromising demand to live a life of fairness, generosity, unselfishness, and justice.**

John the Baptist tells the crowds, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (v. 11). To the tax collectors, John warns, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (v. 13). And to the soldiers, he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (v. 14).

Notice that in John's answer, repentance has less to do with how fervently we pray or how faithfully we attend worship, but instead it has everything to do with how we handle riches, execute public service, and exercise good stewardship. His message of repentance concerns acts of social justice more than religious ceremony or even belief. Repentance, for John, isn't about being really, really sorry for the bad things we have done, or for the good things we have left undone. Rather, **repentance involves the practical acts of actually turning away from our ways of greed, indulgence, egoism, hypocrisy, selfishness, and the like. This is how we are to prepare the way for the coming realm and kin-dom of God,** part of which is already with us. Concerning John's practical exhortation to "bear fruit," biblical commentator Mariam Kamell summarizes it this simple way, "God expects people to behave, not merely believe." **Our repentance, therefore, accomplishes nothing less than improving the personal, communal, social, and political conditions of this world.**

So, as we journey through Advent this year, a journey through the wilderness, let us commit ourselves to a deep level of **self-reflection** – as individuals and as a

community of faith – so that we can be led to repentance. In other words, we are called to examine those ways of being and doing in ourselves that do *not* reflect the way of life that we believe God is calling us to lead. This is a call to **take stock of the ways we hide behind tradition, national or church identity, wealth, ethnicity, privilege, or position in life.**

John the Baptist, crying out from the wilderness, calls us to bear good fruit as witness of our repentance. And John's practical answer to "What shall we do?" is this:

- We are to care for the needy – to share our wealth, whether food or clothing, with those less fortunate.
- We are to be fair and honest in all our dealings with others, especially in our professional work and relationships.
- We are to use our station in life not to lord it over others, but to live within our means and do what is right and just.

We must, according to John the Baptist, live the faith we claim to possess. Authentic Christian living always has that challenge. So, let's put a little Lent in our Advent this year, our journey through the wilderness in preparation of the coming of Christ's Presence among us and within us.

Amen.

Resources:  
*Feasting on the Word*

