

Second Sunday of Advent
Mark 1:1-8

Be Prepared*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
December 10, 2017

“Be Prepared” is the motto of the Boy Scouts of America. In fact, “Be Prepared” is the motto of the Scouting movement around the world. It’s “Siempre Listo” in Spanish. “Toujours Prêt” in French. And “Zhǔn Bèi” in Chinese. The founder of the Scouting movement, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, was once asked “Prepared for what?” “Why, for any old thing,” he replied. “[A]lways [be] in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty.”

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, I loved being a Boy Scout. I joined Troop 355 in the sixth grade, and was a member until I graduated from high school. I remember the first time I went on an overnight camping trip. It was only for two nights at our local scout camp. But if you saw my backpack, you would have thought that I was going away for an entire summer!

My mom made sure that I was prepared for any possible emergency. My backpack was stuffed with every conceivable item, from first aid kit to flashlight to Swiss army knife to compass to rain poncho to cooking gear to Scout Handbook to bug spray to calamine lotion to swim trunks to multiple changes of clothing.

On one level, I was prepared, as Baden-Powell put it, for “any old thing.” But on another level, the backpack ended up being so heavy that I could barely pick it up. And when I finally got to the campsite – exhausted after just walking fifteen minutes from the parking lot – I couldn’t find anything that I needed because there was so much stuff crammed into the backpack. My backpack ended up “being prepared” gone amuck!

Today we celebrate the Second Sunday of Advent. Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Christ. Our gospel reading from today quotes from the Book of Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” During the four weeks of Advent, we prepare ourselves spiritually for Christmas – to celebrate the first coming of Christ over two thousand years ago. But we also prepare ourselves for the second coming of Christ, which is yet to come.

One of the best parts of the Christmas season in Manhattan is the anticipation that builds up during the month of December. There’s nothing quite like seeing the

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department store window displays going up, and smelling the pine-scented Christmas tree stands that pop up on the day after Thanksgiving.

But sometimes getting ready for Christmas is like “being prepared” gone amuck. There is just so much to do. There are Christmas cards to write. There are Christmas trees to put up and decorate. Christmas gifts to buy and wrap. Advent wreaths, Advent calendars, and creches to set up. Holiday travel plans to make. Nutcracker, sing-along Messiah, and Amahl and the Night Visitors performances to attend. Food to cook. Goodies to bake. Parties to host and to attend. In some ways, if we’re not careful, Advent can be like my sixth-grade Boy Scout backpack – so crammed full of stuff that we can hardly carry it all, or find what we truly need.

What if “being prepared” in Advent was actually the opposite of putting more stuff into our holiday backpacks? What if “being prepared” in Advent meant taking stuff out? That is, doing less and not more? What if “being prepared” in Advent meant streamlining our lives and pruning our outside commitments so that we can make room inside of our hearts for the coming of Christ Jesus?

Today’s gospel passage from Mark focuses on John the Baptist, the messenger who “prepares” the way for the coming of Christ. John was not some elite religious leader dressed in fancy vestments. Quite the opposite. He was a wild man, dressed in camel’s hair and a leather belt, and he ate locusts and honey. He was also a humble man – he fully acknowledged that he was not worthy of even stooping down and untying the thong of Jesus’ sandals.

John the Baptist did not come to us carrying gifts, food, or tickets to the Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular. Nor did he come carrying an overstuffed holiday backpack. Rather, John the Baptist came to us with the simple message of repentance and letting go. He reminded us that, in order to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Messiah, we need to take an inventory of our lives and to examine what should be changed.

Advent is like cleaning our homes in anticipation of an important house guest. Whenever Michael and I have guests visiting or staying over, we look around our apartment and take an inventory of what needs to be cleaned, recycled, or thrown out. We look critically at our belongings and ask ourselves about what needs to be vacuumed, dusted off, or polished. That’s what repentance means – taking stock or making an inventory of what needs to be changed.

We often forget that Advent is technically a penitential season. It’s easy – in the midst of all of our holiday busyness – to forget that Advent is actually a mini-Lent of sorts. Advent resembles Lent in a number of ways. Both seasons share the liturgical color of violet. Both seasons suppress the singing of the Gloria. And both seasons challenge us to engage in some kind of fasting or abstinence – for example, how we might simplify our lives in order to welcome Jesus into our hearts.

Today, immediately following our mass, is our 169th annual parish meeting. At that meeting, we will hear about the state of the parish, and we will elect our slate of candidates for the vestry and our wardens. This is an important time for our faith community. Just like John the Baptist's message of repentance, it's a time to take an inventory of where we are, and where we want to go in the future. What has worked well? And what can be improved so that we can do an even better job of welcoming Christ into our midst?

Almost four decades have passed since my early Boy Scout camping experiences. It turns out that I am actually quite the light traveler. I usually go on multi-day trips with nothing more than a small backpack that fits under the seat in front of me and a carry-on bag that fits in the overhead bin. I avoid checking in bags whenever possible.

But, if I were to be honest with you, I'd be the first one to admit that I'm still learning to unstuff my holiday backpack. My holiday backpack still can be crammed full of stuff that gets in the way of my being prepared for the coming of Jesus. It's still a work in progress for me. Now this doesn't mean that there's no room for fun or celebration during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Rather, I'm suggesting that we can both enjoy this season of preparation *and* take stock of our lives.

And so I invite you this Advent season to join me in preparing the way of the Lord by taking an inventory of our lives and seeing what might be streamlined – or let go – in order to make space for Christ Jesus in our hearts.

What in your life might benefit from some change this Advent? Do you need to let go of resentment, hostility, or anger towards someone or something so that you can make room internally for the coming of Christ? Could you benefit from taking out some things in your overstuffed holiday backpack?

Let us lift up John the Baptist – the wild yet humble man dressed in camel's hair and leather belt, and who eats locusts and honey – as our role model for Advent. Let us take stock of our lives in light of the coming of Jesus Christ. Let us examine the ways in which we can simplify our lives. And, most of all, let us always "Be Prepared."