

### ***“Invited to Prepare” – Luke 3: 1-6***

How are your Christmas preparations coming? Do you have your tree? We bought ours yesterday. Is your tree decorated? Ours is. It was decorated by a seven and four-year old, so most of the ornaments are on the bottom. What about Christmas cards; do you still send them? Have you sent them? What kind of baking do you do for Christmas? Do you pull out the old family recipes and bake what previous generations have baked? Do you try new recipes? What do you do on Christmas Day? Do you travel? Does family come to you? Is the menu planned? Is it the same every year? What about the gifts? Have you finished your shopping? I know Santa must do his part, but so do each of us. Have you signed-up for the Church Christmas Party? How many other parties will you attend? Do you go by choice or out of obligation?

We spend a great deal of time and energy preparing for Christmas, don't we? Some of it is fun, and some of it isn't, but we still do it. We still prepare for Christmas, the holiday.

But what about Christmas the Holy Day? As we hear today's scripture passage being read, we are reminded that,

*Into our Advent 'busy-ness' each year enters John the Baptist. He interrupts our schedules and demands that preparations of a different kind be made. John demands that we get ready for Jesus. Before we can bask in Christmas joy and the birth, John forces us to examine ourselves and our world. In the style of the Old Testament prophets before him, John challenges Advent people with a message of personal and corporate self-examination. Advent, John reminds us, is a time to prepare to welcome Jesus and not simply our invited Christmas houseguests. (Kathy Beach-Verhey, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. pg.45)*

So, how are those preparations coming? Chances are not nearly as well, because hearing the message of personal and corporate self-examination is not nearly as much fun as setting up the tree, hanging the lights, buying and receiving presents, reading Christmas card notes, and gathering with family and friends over good food. Yet' as people of faith' we know it is what we are called to do.

This morning I want to look at what it is we are called to do. To do this, we need to hear John's call for what it is, not what we think it is. John's call to repent is first and foremost an invitation, an opportunity for self-examination. As one writer puts it, *The invitation to repent was not a legalistic stipulation, but rather, a door to forgiveness. The foundation of repentance is the mercy of God. (Velli-Matti Karkkainen, Feasting, pg. 46-48)* It is a call to let go of all that stuff that comes between God and us, our neighbor and us, the world and us. You could say it is an invitation to connect, which is not what most of us hear in these words.

Looking closely at today's reading we discover who initiates this invitation. It is God. God's word comes to John, John did not decide to go out and preach. He responded to God's word, and where did this word come to John? In the wilderness.

On Wednesday afternoons, a group of us are discussing a book, called Advent, The Gift of New Hope, by Christopher Webber. In it he writes,

*What was he (John) doing there (in the wilderness)? He seems to have been waiting. Why else would someone be in the wilderness except to break away from the usual pattern of life and be open to God's initiative. And the word came, and John responded. We sometimes imagine John out in the wilderness waiting for people to come, but that's*

*not Luke's understanding of the situation. It was God's word that came to John, and when it came John didn't wait for people to come to him. He went throughout the region calling people. God doesn't send a word to you as a private possession. When the word comes, you go. (pg.35)*

John's message invites people to *take stock of their lives, realize how far they have fallen away from God's will for their lives, and make the changes that are necessary to embrace God's will here and now. (pg.36)* When you think about it this way, it becomes easier, not easy, but easier, to hear the invitation and respond.

We may not be able to run off into the wilderness and wait for God to speak a word to us, but we don't have to. The word is spoken to us right here & now in this place. I am not speaking the word, God is speaking it through this passage, but God also speaks through other people.

*Almost twenty years ago I received a Christmas Card from a parishioner. He was the Chair of the Church Council. A couple of years earlier he had a serious medical issue that almost killed him. He was not a sentimental man, nor was he one to show his emotions, so that card caught me off guard. In the Christmas Card was something that I return to every Advent. It serves as a reminder to me of what preparing, and repenting is all about. I share it with you this morning as an early Christmas gift in hopes that it will help you as you prepare for the coming of Christ.*

*For the moment, be still. Count the ways you are blessed. Be thankful.  
Be slow to quarrel. Search out a forgotten friend. Look for the good.  
Suspend suspicion, be trusting. Write a love letter. Share a treasurer.  
Give a soft answer. Encourage youth. Show your loyalty in word and deed.  
Nourish a grateful attitude. Keep a promise. Find the time.  
Don't harbor a grudge. Listen. Apologize if you are wrong. Forgive.  
Be understanding. Be slow to envy. Think first of someone else.  
Show appreciation. Be kind. Laugh more. Deserve confidence. Be gentle.  
Wage war against prejudice and sexism and every other kind of ism.  
Worship God.  
Gladden the heart of a child. Decry complacency.  
Take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of the earth. Expect miracles.  
Make every day a thanksgiving. Speak your gratitude. Speak it again.  
Speak it still again. Speak it still once more.*

If we did these things more often, my friends, we would discover that Isaiah's words are really God's promise and proclamation that because of grace, mercy, forgiveness and love all may see the salvation of God. All we must do is get ready, prepare by letting go of all that stands between God and us. For that is the message proclaimed in Isaiah's words.

*Prepare the way of the Lord...  
make God's path straight, fill every valley,  
make low every mountain and hill,  
straighten the crooked ways and smooth out the rough ways  
so that all may see and experience the salvation of God.*