

Advent 2C: 2015 Preparing the Way

Advent as the season of preparation was not a large part of my understanding of Christmas when I was growing up. I went out to lunch on Tuesday with a group of ladies from the “morning circle” at Rocky River. I will preface this with the disclaimer that “morning circle” when I was growing up was a designation for those ladies of the church who did not have a job outside the home. By the time my mother became a member of that circle, it was an indication that she was among the older ladies of the church. Somehow as we were talking Tuesday, it was brought up that Advent was not a part of Rocky River’s tradition until recently. Like at Olney, recently may not really be factually accurate depending on how you frame recent in real time. The use of the Advent wreath as part of the tradition of getting ready for Christmas came to Rocky River sometime after 1965 but before 1983. I don’t know the exact date as I was not living in North Carolina then. But that interval places observing Advent as a part of worship beginning somewhere between 32 and 50 years ago. The consensus among the ladies was what they really wanted was to begin singing the Christmas carols sooner rather than later. They didn’t seem convinced that Advent a necessary period. After all you really didn’t need all this much preparation for Christmas as it comes every year. It celebrates God’s gift to us. I suspect that is not an unusual sentiment. Quite frankly, I love Christmas carols. I don’t necessarily like all the music that is played at this time of year; some is cute like Frosty and Rudolph; some is sentimental like White Christmas and I’ll Be Home for Christmas; some is just plain tacky, like Grandpa got run over by a reindeer. But the true Christmas carols are beautiful. I could sing Joy to the World all year long with no problem. I could listen to the Messiah all year long. But I also believe that the church has set aside this time of Advent worship for a reason. We do need to prepare because Emmanuel is coming again. With all our focus on the nativity scene as miraculous as the event and its meaning are, we need to think about being ready for the event—the Advent-- that is still coming. That God came and lived among us 2000 years ago demonstrated a love we have no way to truly comprehend. God’s purpose was not only to live among us, but to teach us and then die for us thus making us acceptable. We need to place hope and trust in God’s promises, in all of them. That means that we trust that even though it has been over 2000 years, he will come again. We need to be living lives expecting that event even though we have no concept of God’s timetable for it. Rev. Michael Lindvall, the pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City once preached a sermon on Christmas Eve about the perils of sentimentality at Christmas. We often protest the commercialization of Christmas. We object to the secularization of Christmas, but we enjoy all that sentimentality that this season brings. We love the story of Christmas. We paint an idealized picture of the nativity scene. We enjoy the pictures of those lovely, singing, winged angels on high, the humble shepherds with their flocks and that poor baby born in a stable. These images are definitely sentimental. They present a pleasant romanticized picture; a snapshot we like. We sing about how that infant has come to save us. Halleluiah, we shout. Gloria we want to sing with the angels. Joy to the World is our refrain. But that picture is skewed. It is incomplete. It only tells part of the story. The whole story—what happens after his birth will encompass the entire range of human experience. We know what happens to that infant, but we don’t want to think about it now. There will be betrayal, torture, and death

which comes too soon. This part of the story is not the stuff of sentimentality in any sense. That brings us to the issue of why we need preparation. Why preparing for this celebration of what God has done in Christ means keeping in mind what God promises through the words of the prophets and the Gospels. Neither the voice of the messenger Malachi nor Isaiah's which Luke uses to identify John the Baptist are texts which lend themselves to sentiment. Malachi tells us the messenger is coming, "but who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." Most of us have a clear image when it comes to a refiner's fire—something so hot that the impurities in it are burnt out, the metal melts and the impurities evaporate. Fullers' soap does not form such a clear image for us. Today we have perfumed body wash and soaps with moisturizers. The lye soap my mom talked about is a very distant memory and unknown to many. But that probably would be a good reference point for Fullers' soap which was an alkaline mix made from plant ashes and would have been harsh like lye soap. The fuller was someone who used that soap and a particular kind of clay to clean, bleach, wet and beat a newly woven piece of cloth until the fibers had a consistent and desirable appearance and feel. How do we use these images of how the covenant messenger's role was described to relate to Jesus Christ? How do we view this infant if his purpose was to come into the world so that we might be refined, cleansed, and made acceptable offerings to the Lord in righteousness? Malachi speaks of judgment against those who do not fear the Lord and who do not follow the ways of the covenant. Yet Malachi also relates that the Lord of hosts says, "do not fear me, for I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished." While Luke 1: 68 says "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them." And he continues speaking of the mercy promised through the covenant, Luke also gives us Zachariah's prophecy about his son John as the one who will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. Luke 3: 4 states it this way, "as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"" These are images where valleys are filled, mountains are made low, the crooked made straight and the rough made smooth. When you compare it to Malachi, the end is the same. Preparing the way for the Lord is about being purified, or straightened, having the rough made smooth like cloth being subjected to the Fullers' soap. The mixing of the images is about understanding that the messenger and the message are about being made acceptable to God. Being cleansed. What does this preparation call for? John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The literal meaning of repentance in Hebrew is not to express sorrow but to turn around and walk the other way, a 180 degree turn. Malachi's message was that the people were to be purified by the messenger in order to be able to present a righteous offering to the Lord. Malachi was more than a predictor of Jesus' birth. He was a truth teller for his time and ours. Malachi reminds us that when the Lord shows up there will be more looked for than a sweet baby and a tinsel-filled tree. The judge will still look carefully at just how we have been treating those members of our community that are on the margins, those who struggle for daily bread and fulfilled life. Luke 3: 1-6 is where we see how Luke identifies himself as a historian. He opens his account with the promise that he

has researched “everything from the beginning” and is going to write an orderly account of it. That is why the one passage I read identifies the various political leaders on the scene—he anchors the events he describes in the larger political and historical scene of the world—he gives a veritable list of who’s who in ancient Palestine. But to none of them is given the Word of the Lord. Instead, that comes to John son of Zachariah, a Levite priest to be sure, but not one who served at the Temple in Jerusalem. God chose a nobody to prepare the way for God’s own Son to come among us. According to Scripture God regularly chooses people whom the world sees as insignificant through whom to do marvelous things. John the Baptist, Mary the illiterate unwed mom and teenager, the no account shepherds at the very bottom of the economic ladder who serve as audience for the heavenly choir. Again and again, Luke tells us, God chooses people the world can easily ignore to participate in God’s world changing, world-saving activity. So Advent is important. Advent is when we begin to prepare the way of the Lord in our world. Just as Luke placed John and his voice calling out in the wilderness in the context of Palestine’s political world, so we too are to be voices in the wilderness of our world. God desires to be at work in this world. God desires for us to be participants in the reign which Christ brought near. The exceedingly good news of this season is that our paying attention is not a prerequisite to Jesus’ coming. Prepared or not, when the time comes, birth cannot be stopped; neither can the second coming. Nevertheless, this Advent season is a time when we are called to expect Jesus to appear, to look for him, even as we go about our daily living. Advent is the time for us to consider how we use the gifts and talents which God has placed in our hands to prepare the way for God’s kingdom to become present here and now. Advent is a time to look for Jesus’ face in the faces which surround us, in the faces of those whose lives are lived on the fringes, in the faces of those whose eyes reflect despair and hopelessness. As we have lit candles symbolizing hope and peace, light in the darkness of our world...we prepare to welcome the true light into our lives which purifies and cleanses us so that we may live according to the teachings of that infant who came and dwelt among us and desires to live within us even now. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.