

Prepare the Way

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Luke 3:1-6

December 2, 2012: First Sunday of Advent

I love this Sunday when it rolls around every year. We celebrate our anniversary as a church. We welcome new members and recommit as continuing ones. And we gather 'round this beautiful wreath of greens and growing light and walk boldly into Advent together.

I've been thinking this week of our grand tenth-anniversary celebration last year, with the musical magic of Ken Medema and the warm greetings of congratulation from friends near and far. It was a *big time!* In contrast, this year Advent feels to me like a "littler time"—a quiet time of hunkering down and going deep rather than expanding wide.

I think that has to do with why I have so appreciated our two recent Taize services. I feel ready for the gentle repetition of the chants and the rich silences between them. I feel open to receiving the messages that come in a language apart from words. And so I'm not going to offer too many words tonight.

Typically on this night, Nancy, Ken, and I would each offer brief reflections on how we see things on this particular anniversary. Nancy was planning to incorporate hers into her Call to the Table, so we will just have to wait to hear them at another time when she is feeling well. I'm grateful to Mark Siler for stepping in at the last minute to do our Call tonight, which opens up a space for him to share about his upcoming weeks in Cuba as he invites us to the holy feast.

Ken, of course, is in South Dakota, tending to his sister and his mother. His words are with us in the covenant litany we will say together and in a gift that each of us will receive—a scroll bearing his litany "My Soul Magnifies You," based on Mary's Magnificat and found in Ken's book *In the Land of the Living*. We have Kaki Roberts to thank for the beautiful design.

We've chosen "Prepare the Way" as our theme for this Advent. We speak of Advent as a time of waiting and anticipation, building to the celebration of Jesus' birth. But what we do as we wait is important. And the ancient call that John the Baptist issued to his followers is ours as well: "Prepare the way for the Holy One."

We prepare in lots of ways. Trees and lights go up, candles are lit. Gifts are made or bought, and wrapped. Festive food is prepared. That's how we get ready on the outside. And how we get ready on the inside is just as important—more so, I would say.

I would venture that the most important thing we can do is keep our eyes open. Keep watching. And prepare to be surprised.

That sounds like a bit of an oxymoron. If we're prepared, can we be surprised? I think so. The surprises come to those open enough to create space for them to happen. And to those who are looking in the right place when they come.

Eleven years ago, I couldn't have imagined this Circle. When Ken, Nancy, and I decided to launch this church, one of our mantras came from words by Kobi Yamada that I found on a postcard: "Sometimes you just have to take the leap, and build your wings on the way down." We're still constructing our wings.

What a surprise and delight to welcome so many young families. To have the wisdom of elders and the energy of youth among us. To bless births and passings, adoptions and ordinations, graduations and adventures of all sorts. To make our voices heard for marriage equality and clean energy, and against war and persecution of undocumented friends.

To go to Marion prison bearing eighty dozen cookies, and to MANNA food bank with an altarful of canned goods, and to Iglesia Getsemani in Cuba with open hearts and gifts to offer and receive. To return week after week to this table, to share a meal that spills over into a feast of food and conversation.

We need to be prepared to be surprised—and to make sure we're looking in the right place when the surprises come.

It's easy to dismiss the first couple verses of our reading tonight. What does it really matter that Tiberius was emperor, and Pilate was governor, and Herod's brother ruled over those difficult-to-pronounce regions of Ituraea and Trachonitis, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas? But if we skip over these details, we miss the point.

After this rundown of all the “important” people of the day—the “weighty men” of that political and religious landscape—we hear this: “The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” In the wilderness! The message is, if we want to see where God is at work, we need not look in the palace, or the governor’s mansion, or the temple—but in the desert.

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The word of God is not at home in the great institutions of power. In fact, if we read a little beyond tonight’s passage, we find John preaching about wrath and repentance, referring to those who want an easy way out, who feel saved by power or pedigree, as a “brood of vipers.” The world is going to be massively reshaped. Like a spiritual bulldozer, God’s Word is going to fill up valleys and level mountains.

I find it hard to read that in this time and place and not think of mountaintop-removal coal mining. So imagine that massive displacement of earth—but applied toward justice. An even-ing out. The haughty being brought low, and the humble being lifted up, as Mary’s Magnificat tells it.

You have to know where to look. On Thursday evening I went to a community meditation led by energy healer Marianne. For one meditation, with our hands raised, she encouraged us to focus our closed eyes on our “Third Eye”—the spot between and just above our physical eyes. She said it might be difficult.

After a while, the next eleven minutes started to feel like a rather excruciating eternity to me. My arms got tired and my eyes wanted to focus straight ahead on my eyelids—the restful place they’re used to looking during meditation. Marianne can easily focus on her Third Eye for half an hour and more. She has trained her eyes to embrace this discipline.

So, where are our eyes gazing this season? There’s a lot of clutter out there: TV shows and tacky Christmas songs, bright packages wrapped up in consumerism. The things of the world glisten and sparkle during this season, and we’re used to seeing them everywhere. Hard not to look. Hard to train our eyes to look elsewhere.

But we’re reminded again tonight that the surprises don’t pop up in the usual places. They have a way of showing up in wildernesses. And manglers. In the cold and isolated and out-of-the way places. On the margins.

***Keep your eyes focused this season
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So keep your eyes focused this season on those who reside there on the margins, reminding us for whom the gospel is good news. Keep scanning the horizon for a star that will shine over a drafty barn. And keep looking into your heart, to see what valleys need to be filled in and what mountains brought low. Be prepared. We’re in for a wild ride.

Many of you got to meet my young friend from Detroit, Lydia Wylie-Kellermann, and her partner, Erinn, when they visited at the end of October. A couple of years ago, Lydia put together an Advent booklet, in honor of her mother, Jeanie, who died on New Year’s Eve 2005. I will let the words of daughter and mother end my thoughts.

From Lydia’s introduction of the booklet:

This will be my fourth Advent without my mom... I do not have many memories of [her]—perhaps a survival tactic. What I do have are the traditions she left behind. They are where I hold her memory and feel her close. In childhood, chilly Monday disarmament vigils, wreaths crafted from paths walked, silence and darkness honored, intentional song over nightly harvest, aroma of fresh-cut wood wafting from basement workshop, loving crafts for loved ones, rejecting culture’s needs from the white, jolly man. A spirit of sacredness in it all...I cling to this time, finding her presence with the music, smells, and traditions, within the silence and the darkness...

This reflection book comes [with] a hope to make this and every Advent intentional. To remember to stop each day and pay attention. To reflect upon the wisdom of friends and prophets. To honor the silence. To be still. To light the candles. To remember our past and prepare the way of the future. A future that has nothing to do with commercialism, but a future of struggle and hope in the coming and creation of the Beloved Community.

And the reflection for the First Sunday of Advent, from Jeanie, written several years earlier during Advent of 1998, two months after discovering she had brain cancer:

This Advent, as we light the candles in the dark and sing for Emmanuel, let's be even more intentional than usual in clearing the commercial Christmas assault from our minds and hearts. Whatever God is calling us to has little to do with shopping and driving ourselves into a frenzy creating the "perfect" holiday. We need to honor the silence and the dark, to remember our stories, to teach the youth in our lives what we believe matters. We need to recall, to intuit, to dream the life we're called to and then make a plan that allows us to strip down enough to have it. In the course of that, of course, we need to give thanks for all that we are and for those traveling in our circles and beyond.

I give thanks for you, dear friends, and for eleven years of traveling this journey together. And I look forward with great anticipation to all that the future will bring. Amen.