

The Second Sunday of Advent, 6 December 2009
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

This second Sunday of Advent is always built around John the Baptist. John, Jesus' cousin. John, the wild and unwashed man. John, the one who lived alone in the desert eating insects and honey. John, who was not afraid to accuse powerful people, even a notoriously vicious King, of sin and faithlessness. John, who was rude even to the people who flocked to him for baptism. John, who announced the Christ before he came to him, and who was the first to recognize Jesus when he did come.

In place of a psalm today, the lectionary gave us the wonderful song that John's father, the priest Zechariah, sang at his son's birth. John's father was filled with joy at this great blessing from God. First, it was a personal blessing, a child to an elderly childless couple, But Zechariah knew that this child was not going to be the dutiful son who is the envy of the neighbors and takes care of his parents in their old age. He recognized that this child would be part of God's salvation for Israel, a blessing for everyone. In his song, Zechariah proclaims that his son John will be a prophet.

It had been 350 years, since Malachi, the last prophet. People spoke often about how the voice of God had gone silent, that there were no longer prophets in Israel. And yet Zechariah proclaims, "You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way," saying that this newborn will indeed be a prophet, that he will be the one anticipated by Malachi and Isaiah and the others.

And so John is described in the Gospels as:

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John does grow up to be this long-anticipated prophet, breaking the prophetic silence. He grows up to cause all sorts of trouble, to turn people's lives and expectations upside down.

We hear over and over in today's hymns and readings about flattening, about rough places becoming smooth, about crooked ways becoming straight, about mountains and valleys being brought into a flatness. What is it that John is telling us?

In this week's *Journey with Jesus*, Dan Clendenin summarizes it this way, "With his Advent announcement John urges us to spurn anything and everything that hinders ultimate allegiance to Jesus. He invites us to make our crooked ways straight, to flatten all hilly terrain, and to prepare space for the birth of the Messiah into our own lives."

Everyone's hills and valleys, everyone's rough and crooked places are different. We each need to look and find what it is that block's our view of God, that closes the door to Christ's entry into our hearts and lives.

John tells us to repent, that is, to turn around, to choose a new path. He says that this is worth doing because the Kingdom of God has come very near to us. It is accessible; we can get there. We just need to find the right path.

This of course is what the Advent Conspiracy is talking about as well. Choosing a different way. Worship fully; spend less; give more; love all.

This week's focus is the second of the admonitions. Spend less. In this difficult economic time we are probably all spending less because we have less to spend, but that is not all it means. What might it mean in a deeper way? We are invited into this change because God's Kingdom, the making of all things right with us and with God, is right around the corner.

So, thinking in a literal, chronological sense, thinking of Christ bursting upon us unexpectedly, what would we like him to catch us doing? Running wildly about a mall, fighting other people for the last toy – or dress – or television? Frantically cleaning and decorating? Fretting about who is giving things to us and so that we need to find just the right gift for them? Probably not.

We would like Christ to find us preparing for his coming into our lives – we would like him to find us ready to greet him with joy, like John the Baptist.

So spending less could mean not spending ourselves in the material preparations for festivity, could mean withdrawing our allegiance from all the seductive demands of our materialistic culture, calming the frenzy, making a peaceful place in our hearts and homes and families where Christ can find space.

When we hear John remind us that the Kingdom of God is very near, we know that means that Christ is very near, because it is in Christ that God's Kingdom has come to us. In Christ all that is right for the world exists already. And we are invited to turn around, to straighten and smooth our paths so that Christ can come right into us. Then the Kingdom will be in us and we, too, will be the presence of God in human form.

This is a joyful thought. I am very grateful that we are called to be the Kingdom as Jesus embodied it, not the prophecy as John embodied it. I really would not want to have to eat insects, wear animal skins, and live in the desert.

This is the second week in a row that we have heard Saint Paul expressing his overwhelming gratitude for his people, his community of faith. Together they were living out the Kingdom of God, the life of love and generosity. They were living out of gratitude for one another. The Kingdom was alive in them.

In Advent our persistent question is “How do we prepare the way for God, for Christ, for the birth, for the Kingdom?”

Worship fully; spend less; give more; love all.

Gratitude for our community and the blessing we are to one another is part of that. Gratitude is surely an important tool for finding a new path, for smoothing and straightening, for preparing the way.

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent, but also Saint Nicholas Day. Saint Nicholas was a fine example of living the Kingdom life, of all that the Advent Conspiracy seeks, even though his distorted image has become a symbol of all that they are trying to overcome.

Nicholas was a beloved bishop in the town of Myra, now Demre, Turkey, whose reputation for generosity and concern for all people spread far and wide and has lasted more than a millennium and a half.

A favorite tale from his ministry involves a story that sadly could occur today in many parts of our world. In his city was a faithful man who had fallen on hard financial times. He had three daughters, whom he loved very much, but he had no way to provide for them. They could not marry, because marriage required the payment of a dowry and he had no funds. The wisdom of his time and culture said that he must sell the daughters into slavery so that his debts could be paid and they could be settled, no longer his responsibility.

The bishop did not accept the popular, practical solution. So at the proper time, for each daughter, he went quietly to their house at night and threw into the window a bag of his own gold, sufficient to pay her dowry. Three daughters. Three nights. Three bags of gold. Joy and gratitude abounded.

Bishop Nicholas wanted no credit for himself, no attention. He simply wanted to help. And his help made it possible for the three girls to have good lives, for the whole family to escape grinding poverty. People did find out, of course - and declared Nicholas not only patron saint of children and assorted other people, but also of pawn brokers. That is why the traditional three gold balls are their

symbol (representing the three bags of Nicholas' gold) – and they are indeed often the ones who can give people in desperate straits the money they need to carry on.

None of the stories of Nicholas find him spending his treasure on himself or on gifts to 'win friends and influence people.' They all find him offering love and help where it is needed, sometimes in the form of money, sometimes not.

At a meeting this week we talked about our faith lives in terms of the ropes traditionally used on farms during blizzards. When the blizzard is expected, a rope is tied to the house door and the other end to the barn door. This way, even when the snows are deep and visibility is gone, people can find their way from the house to the barn to check on the animals, and back again to the warmth and safety of home.

Saint Nicholas offered people the rope they needed, whether it was through the sacraments, or gold to rescue children, or calming the seas so that sailors could come safely to port.

When we are out in the blizzard, casting our money about will not lead us home. Frantic worrying will not lead us home. Busy-ness will not lead us home. Where is your rope? Is it securely tied? Will it lead you to your true home, where Christ has come to welcome you?