

Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2016, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-12

“Prepare! Be Ready!”

Three men were walking in the desert. One was carrying a loaf of bread, another was carrying a bottle of wine, and the third one carried a car door. They explained to each other: “If I get hungry I can eat the bread!” The second one said “If I get thirsty I can drink the wine!” and the last one said “If I get hot --- I can roll down the window!” That is an interesting take on being prepared! The season of Advent is about preparation.

Before Jesus took on human flesh, He sent someone from the priestly line of Levi - John the Baptist - to prepare the way. Scripture tells us that as a child in his mother Elizabeth's womb – John leapt when Mary and her unborn baby Jesus approached them. John's excitement was unmistakable even then - for his savior who was coming to free all humanity from sin. I highly suggest you to go and re-read the accounts from Matthew and Luke. We are studying them at our Wednesday night Christian Education before Christmas – we are digging in and finding out some incredible information about Zechariah, John's father, Elizabeth – John's mother, and we will learn more about Mary, who was only about 14 years old. That's kind of scary, when you think that that kind of weight, that kind of privilege was put upon this young girl's shoulders, during a time when it was not acceptable to be an unwed mother. She was betrothed, but even Joseph had doubts.

Tradition tells us that John the Baptist grew up in clear view of Mt. Nebo, where Moses was allowed to look upon the Promised Land and where he spoke of the Promised Messiah. John lived near the Jordan River where Joshua crossed at a place called Adam, where the river separated in two, like the Red Sea did, so that the Ark of the Covenant could pass through, near Jericho whose walls had fallen at Joshua's blast. This was the same region where the Prophet Amos pastured his flocks and dreamed of a Davidic King who would come and rule all of the nations. Let me clarify some of what we heard in our readings this morning where there was a lot of talk about Gentiles and Nations, and a root of Jesse. Jesse was David's father, and the being from the “line of David” meant that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem which was David's hometown, for the census which was called for. The root that is spoken about is of course Jesus. If you go a little further in Romans 11:17 Paul talks about us being “grafted in” to that root. It is clear that Jesus is from the ‘line of David’, but He is from a greater line than that. Mary and Elizabeth were relatives as we are told in the Gospel, but Elizabeth and Zechariah were BOTH from the priestly line of Levi. Therefore, Elizabeth's relative, Mary was probably also from that priestly line – a holy line. Jesus therefore came not only from the priestly line, but from the Heavenly Father. Amazingly, as we dig in and look at the Holy Scripture – we are given clue after clue as to who Jesus is; His real identity. Super heroes call it a ‘secret identity.’ Jesus did not want to make it a secret! He kept it quiet, but He really started to show people; not to prove who He was, but to reveal who He was. To rule the ‘nations’ – the ‘nations’ are the Gentiles, that is how they were referred to. Jesus didn't just come for the Jews, but He came for the whole world – as we are told in John 3:16.

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This guy John was a unique guy – to say the least. He lived on locusts and wild honey. On the trip that Marilyn and I led to Israel in 2014, shortly before coming to visit St. Andrew's, we were treated to some locusts and wild honey. Not the bugs – oh no – it is believed that the locusts might not have been bugs at all but instead the pod of the carob tree, and the wild honey could have been the fruit of the fig tree. All of those things were easily accessible then, and still are. That sounds a whole lot better than bugs and having to take the wild honey from the bee hives.

John was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. Israel – which was living under the thumb of the Roman Empire, in bondage, was electrified by the voice of this strange, somewhat rugged, fearless hermit of the desert, crying out on the banks of the Jordan that the long prophesied Deliverer was now at hand. The message of his cry was simple - to "*Repent.*" His preaching attracted large crowds; he was apparently very popular. People were paying attention, and so many people came to be baptized by him. John's leadership had great influence and the people seemed ready to do anything that he would ask them to do.

John was at the peak of his popularity when he baptized Jesus and proclaimed Him to be the Messiah. Remember it was John who boldly stated "*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29) Then, with his mission accomplished, he told his followers about Jesus. The Apostle Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist – who after meeting Jesus just had to tell Peter. John had awakened the nation, and presented to them the Son of God, the Lamb of God. His work was done.

This season of Advent heralds us to the coming of "*God with us*" – "*Emmanuel.*" It is the time when we remember God coming to earth to take on human form and live as we live. Consider this: the Creator of the universe gives up His throne. He can have and do anything He wants but He comes to be submissive, as a baby. Many of you know what it is like to have a baby, and that baby relies on mama, for a real long time. God took on that purpose – to rely on another human being. How powerful is that? It really brings it home to us, and that is why we remember God with us. We remember what He did, not only the sacrifice on the cross, but the sacrifice of being humbles enough to do all of the things that we do, including to get hungry, laugh, and cry. Advent prepares us to welcome the arrival of God - The Teacher - who by example showed us how He would like us to live. How we should share His love between our Lord God and ourselves and, between you and me; between our neighbors and ourselves. There is a saying that says 'before you can love others- you have to love yourself!' I will take that a step further – before you can forgive others- you have to forgive yourself!

Last Sunday- the first Sunday of Advent, we lit the first Advent candle - the candle that represents "hope." It symbolizes our hope for God's coming again. "*The great day of the LORD is near -- near and coming quickly. Listen!*" according to the Prophet Zephaniah1:14. This Sunday – the Second Sunday of Advent we lit another purple candle, the "Peace" candle. When I think of peace – I think of when Jesus met the Apostles in the Upper Room, and said "My Peace I give to you, peace be with you." Peace; Shalom! Next week we light the Rose Colored Candle. Many think it is pink, but it is Rose – according to the Liturgical calendar – what does

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that mean? It is the “Joy” candle. Then the last purple candle is lit – the candle of “Love.” Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. You will see that on Christmas Eve we will replace all of them with white candles and light a large white candle in the center – the Christ Candle – the Christmas Candle.

The season of Advent gives us four weeks to think about where we are in God’s creation of things. Advent needs to be the time when we, as individuals, as members of the Body of Christ, turn a mirror on ourselves. And we should look at that reflection of ourselves and consider what our place is within this large and wonderful family. “Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.” We need to take a good look!

Isaiah in our first reading - expresses Advent’s hope: the hope that God would come and find us mindful of Him, in preparation for Him.

Let’s face it; because of the demands of our life, it is very easy to forget what we should be all about –

- that we are, because of God;
- that we have, because of God.

As adopted children of God – Romans 11:17 – we are grafted in to the root of Jesse that we read about earlier; we are the heirs of a truly wonderful God. Without our belief and faith in God, this would certainly be a different world to live in. Without faith – this would not be a “Wonderful Life.”

Advent is four weeks, to know God, to remember that, in Christ Jesus, He is the best thing to ever happen to us.

- Advent is four weeks when we should reflect on how we might listen to and act on John’s call to the people – to repent of our sins.
- Advent is four weeks when we should balance our busy schedules with quiet times for reflection and to listen to the “still small voice of God.” When you are praying, sometimes it is important to stop talking and to listen – so that God can get a word in edgewise. Believe me, if you let Him – He will talk to you.
- Because listening allows God to put things that matter on our hearts; reflection gives us the room to ask ourselves questions that we may not otherwise hear from others.

Questions like:

- What do I believe?
- Why do I believe it?
- What difference is it making in how I live?
- What do I give to God?
- What of mine belongs to God?

Advent should cause us to do two things: watch and wait. Staying awake and being alert are two Advent behaviors for preparation that Jesus calls us to.

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Jesus is not coming to Bethlehem this Christmas. Bethlehem is history. Bethlehem has moved. Bethlehem is now located right here in Douglas, Ga; wherever WE are: wherever we love, trust, laugh, cry, and take a stand; wherever we tell the truth, forgive, or just wait for God to teach us what to do. Our hearts are the new Bethlehem! That is God's gift to us or, or rather God's challenge to us. And how can we thank God?

God has blessed us with the abilities and the means to do His will. What we do when God calls upon us is our obedient "thank you" to God; call it "grateful obedience." But first, we have to be aware of when God is calling us. We need to make times of stillness and reflection, to hear Him! We need times of stillness and reflection, time spent deep in His Holy Word, to decide how we will prepare ourselves for His coming again.

As stewards of our lives - God gives us the opportunity to do something for Him in our lives. We are here as short term tenants, our visas are limited in this world, and we have the freedom to decide about what we will do and how we will spend our time. We can decide to respond to God's call, or not. So let me ask you a question that I asked you a few weeks ago from Jesus' words found in Luke 18:8 "*when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?*"

I believe the answer is through prayer and preparation – as St. Paul says "*that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God.*" (Philippians 1:9-11)