

December 10, 2023

Advent II

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Mark 1:1-8



“Christmas cancelled in Bethlehem,” reported news outlets around the globe just a few weeks ago. Citing the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, papers like the *Washington Post* sadly explained that Bethlehem will host “no public celebrations, no twinkling Christmas lights, and no decorated tree in Manger Square.” Expressing a desire to show “solidarity” with the war’s ever-increasing number of victims, Bethlehem’s town leaders stated that Christmas celebrations this year would not be “appropriate.” Circumstances, in other words, just are not right for merrymaking, conditions not suitable for joyous celebrations, or put differently, this year the road to the manger is not properly prepared. Rubble blocks the way; in this case, literally the rubble and the corpses strewn between Gaza and Israel.

This claim that it is not “appropriate” to celebrate Christmas amidst ongoing suffering and war—which I do not dispute—raises the question, nevertheless, of when holiday celebrations would be “appropriate.” When would the time be right, under what conditions would it be suitable to welcome the Savior, the Messiah, of the world? “Well, when people stop killing each other,” you might well answer. And that’s true to a certain extent, but I think this question of how to have an “appropriate” Christmas celebration is pointing to some deeper issues: issues of how we think about Christmas—what Christmas is, what Christmas is supposed to be like, what Christmas asks, even demands, of us; issues of how to properly prepare for the extremely unique event of God becoming human.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Mark takes up this issue of appropriately preparing for the arrival of Christ when he quotes from Isaiah: “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” What does Mark mean when he writes about “prepar[ing] the way of the Lord, mak[ing] his paths straight”?

Mark here is envisioning a royal procession, with commoners along the way smoothing out the path, straightening or levelling the road by literally removing rocks, rubble, and other debris so that the royal figure—in this case, Messiah Jesus—could have a smooth and speedy journey to his destination. But the irony of this command to prepare the Messiah’s way is that, in a sense, Jesus doesn’t need anything from us: Christ, King of the Universe, the one who baptizes with the power of the Holy Spirit, hardly needs us to make his pathway straight, as if he might stumble or

fall. As Jesus himself says in Luke, the rocks themselves would sing his praise, and so surely, if need be, they can get out of the way of their own accord.

No, the levelling process actually is more so for our own benefit: the highway upon which Christ travels this Advent season is the royal road into our church, our communities, our homes, our families, and our own souls. And we need to do the work of preparing this metaphorical road so that we are ready and able to receive Christ when he appears. The straightening of the road, in other words, is not so much for Jesus' benefit as for ours.

So how might we prepare the way for Jesus this Christmas? A great place to start is by learning from the humility and Christ-centeredness of John the Baptist. In this morning's passage, John clearly knows who he is, who Christ is, and the difference between those two. As he confesses openly to the crowds, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In our consumerist culture which tries to make Christmas about us and all that we "deserve" this holiday season, John the Baptist offers a profoundly countercultural and very badly needed example of someone who knows that the arrival of Christ Jesus fundamentally is not about him. John understands that the star of this show is Jesus, and he orients his entire life around exalting Jesus, highlighting Jesus, pointing the crowds away from himself and towards the Messiah.

I wonder where in our lives might we need a John-the-Baptist style reorientation: Where have we seized the limelight which properly belongs to Christ? How might we take a step back and let Christ have centerstage? With all the busyness of the next few weeks, this reorientation towards Christ will not happen unless we deliberately take steps to allow it to happen. So how might we center ourselves on Jesus, removing the rocks and the rubble that obstruct his free movement into our hearts?

One idea that can help us both to recognize and start to remove the boulders blocking Christ's path is, very simply, to take some time each day to pray. If you already pray 3 minutes each day, this Advent try making it 5; if you pray 10 minutes, try 15. If praying each day feels like too large of a task right now, then pray every other day. The specifics are not so important as consistency. And

don't worry about what to say. Being present with God is what is most important. You really need not say anything. If you want to use the time to be silent in God's presence, that's perfectly fine. The specific words or lack of words really isn't the point. And prayer, by the way, need not be a solemn activity that requires our eyes to be closed and head bowed. For some people, that works very well as a way to communicate with God. But, depending on your personality, silent, solitary prayer really might not fit your style of communication and interaction. If need be, prayer can be very active, moving your body as you walk through the woods or rake leaves or workout. Again the specifics of the form are not most important; the crucial point is finding a form of prayer in which you can really bring your full self before God, communing with God, allowing God time and space to speak into your life.

The point, moreover, is that you're taking time to do something so countercultural, something so John-the-Baptist-like: by devoting the precious resource of your time to being with God, you are stepping out of the limelight of your life; you're acknowledging the presence and the importance of God, and allowing Christ space and access to do the lifelong work of reorienting you towards him. Christ is very respectful, and while he often works behind the scenes in mysterious ways, he never forces anything upon us. Rather he often waits for you to say, "okay, Jesus, I'm ready, come have centerstage, come have your rightful role at the center of my life; I trust you and I give you control." That reorientation of Christ in your life can begin this Advent, even today, by simply stepping out of the endlessly rushing stream of activities for a few minutes and turning to God in prayer.

Every Christmas we celebrate Christ especially as "Immanuel," literally meaning "God with us." This Christ longs to be Immanuel for us, dwelling with and in us, acting as the engine of our lives, filling them with otherworldly peace, hope, and joy. But so often our hearts' pathways are strewn with rocks, boulders, and craters, which prevent us from enjoying Christ's pure, fluid movement through us.

Although this year Bethlehem officially has cancelled its Christmas, as literal rubble bars the way to the manger, may we clear the road for Christmas to come in and through our own hearts. And by preparing the path now and in the coming weeks, may we be able to more fully enjoy Christ, Immanuel, God with us on Christmas morning. Amen.