

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

Advent is not a season of preparation for Christmas, but for Christ.

That is why, as we progress through these four weeks, our scripture texts point us, ironically enough, first to Christ's Second Coming in judgement, and before setting the stage for Christ's first coming – that birth in Bethlehem we celebrate each year.

Last week we read from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark's Gospel about the end of the world and the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory, and the admonition to keep awake.

This week we hear from the opening chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

Mark, the first Gospel to be written down, has no infancy narrative. Instead it begins by quoting the prophet Isaiah about preparing the way for God, and then introduces John the baptizer – the one who was doing the preparing.

We are told John was baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins, but that the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And that's it. That's where our reading ends. Jesus doesn't even appear. How is this preparing us for Christ? Perhaps it's not – perhaps it's about preparing us to **follow** Christ – to keep awake – because baptism is intimately connected to discipleship.

Mark, along with Matthew and Luke, record that John proclaimed a baptism of **repentance**.

One way to think of repentance is to turn around – the root meaning of the word repent in Greek meaning to turn. We turn around – and return to God.

We include this repentance in our own baptismal service. We ask those who will be baptized to renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God; to renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God; and to renounce all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God. We then ask whether they will **turn to** Jesus Christ and accept him as their savior.

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Another way to understand repentance is as changing one's heart.

Prophets throughout the Bible called God's people to repentance by speaking to both hearts and minds – imploring us to hear God's call in our lives.

Such was the case for the community of Israelites living in exile that Second Isaiah spoke words of comfort and hope to in today's text from the Book of Isaiah.

Did you notice I said Second Isaiah? Does that mean anything to you, or did you wonder what that meant? I'm going to digress a bit, and do a little Biblical history here, because it's both interesting and important.

For the first thirty-nine chapters of the book of the Prophet Isaiah, the prophet that scholars call “First Isaiah” delivered a word of warning to the people of 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Jerusalem. Two hundred years later, “Second Isaiah” picks up with chapter 40.

A lot happened in that time. First Isaiah spoke of the threat of the mighty empire of Assyria, but in Second Isaiah’s time, the Babylonian Empire has destroyed Jerusalem and carried people off to captivity – what became known as the Babylonian exile.

This disaster, like all disasters, provoked theological reflection and lamentation. Those in exile felt cut off, and as far away from God as their homeland.

Second Isaiah, then, came along with words of comfort and hope. That hope was not rooted in people’s strength or wits or goodness, but in the faithfulness of God<sup>1</sup> – the God who feeds his flock like a shepherd and gathers his lambs in his arms.

And so, the prophet tells those whose hearts are weary to hear God’s call once again: PREPARE – God is always present, bidden or unbidden – simply prepare your hearts.

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Just as the people of Israel long ago were told to clear a path for God, to make a way where there appeared to be no way, we too are told to make a way for God to come into our lives – to remove the obstacles and impediments in our hearts and minds, to tear down rather than to build up walls, to clear out old animosities and grievances, to cut back the weeds of doubt and greed,<sup>2</sup> not just to make a nice little bed for the newborn babe, but to open up our lives to the transforming grace of the Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, [www.ucc.org/weeklyseeds](http://www.ucc.org/weeklyseeds).

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Matthews, *Weekly Seeds*, [www.ucc.org/weeklyseeds](http://www.ucc.org/weeklyseeds).

As one biblical scholar notes,<sup>3</sup> it is much easier to focus on the baby in the manger – we want the good news of Christmas without the challenge – the birth narrative without the prophet – redemption without judgment.

And so we have this season of Advent to remind us of both – the baby and the prophet, the redemption and the judgment – with the proclamation that it is **all** the GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST.

As you look around this Advent season, can you hear the voice of the prophet in the midst of holiday sounds? How are you preparing your heart and your life for Christ, once again and always? Will you turn around and answer the shepherds call?

In the coming weeks, may the hope God is ever offering us bring us comfort, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

~ AMEN ~

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Goettler – Advent meditation in the *Christian Century* (11/29/11)