

Sermon, Dec. 9, 2007, Advent 2 Yr A  
 Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Matthew introduces us to John, as the one Isaiah said would “*prepare the way of the Lord.*” I feel John the Baptist was a somewhat simple guy despite the vivid description of his wild appearance. He lived in the desert where he could be alone with God, he wore rough made clothing, ate bugs and honey, whatever he could find. Obviously he was faithful that God would provide for him. His is a good, but difficult way to live. He was humble, despite being of priestly ancestry and he was a people person; drawing large crowds of folks to prepare themselves for the “coming.” Perhaps he threw in a few bugs and honey for the hungry travelers, showing that he was hospitable after all.

John is the perfect persona of what a worshipping community could be: simple, close to God, appropriate and reverent in adorning their sanctuary, faithful that God will provide for all their needs, humble in spite of their theological heritage, welcoming and inclusive, specialists of the ordinary, certain and convinced of God’s promises, ready to feed the hungry.

John *attracted* people in his simplicity, he symbolically anointed them to welcome them, (baptism), he actually preached and taught God’s Word to the people rather than demanding their obedience to the law, (which is what the Sadducees and Pharisees were upset about), then he told them to prepare for something really great to happen: they *would soon see the Way of Christ* with their own eyes, and like he, they would be transformed. There’s hardly a better way to be a worshipping community. I imagine the folks whom John baptized began to come together, re-forming communities focused on the arrival of the Messiah, praying they would try to be like him.

A recent study regarding church size and effectiveness shows that the average size of churches and synagogues in the United States is *40* people. Not 400 or 4000 but 40. They are the most likely to be stable in terms of finances and relationships. They are the most likely to desire knowing God and express their spirituality. Further, small church members are most likely to be actively involved in reaching out to their community, actually taking part in the life in their community both individually and as a congregation; not so much in matters of religion but social causes, taking care of people, making peace, nurturing relationships. Sound like a place you know?

Small congregations languish about growth, “we need to grow, and we want to grow, we want people who have “gone away” to come back,” is often our prayer. But the answer to that prayer is all too often measured *only* in terms of numbers of people in the pews and cash in the plate, and spiritual matters are tended to once we’re in a “good place” in terms of numbers.

Churches will have all they need as long as they take care of people first. People will come and they will give of themselves and their resources. And persons who have left the church for this or that reason, well, that’s their business and not our worry.

Maybe they just needed some space from the power of a loving, inclusive, worshipping community, some space and time to pray about their next step in their life in Christ; moving beyond supporting to sustaining and participating, preparing for the way of Christ. Many folks I talk to, who have “gone away” from the church do regret it, that’s an expression of the kind of repentance John is yelling about. They say, “I got to get myself back to church.” They are preparing the way for Christ.

So once the pews and plates are full and folks come home, what then, what’s next? Well, we hope the wild-eyed-and-weird preacher and musicians keep folks entertained, so they’ll stick around, right? No, that won’t work. Small churches, stable in their relationships and responsibilities will turn to *spiritual matters*, a desire to *know* God, and just *how* to live a life in Christ; how to be like Christ everyday. That’s what will work, and keep the lights on, the holy house warm, and voices in the pews raised.

Some people are overjoyed at the prospect of gaining a deeper spirituality yet others are frightened by it. We can care for and nurture each other in our spiritual growth. Ask folks what they’re looking for, maybe we’re looking for the same thing, perhaps we could search together. Discernment, retreat, gathering, and prayer are paramount, *the way of Christ has to be prepared*; folks have to be *reacquainted* with the *heart of their spirit* in a nurturing way, or it can be just too much to bear.

I believe growth in the church is a *desire for a mature spirituality* a spiritual expression based on one’s life experiences, not a religious experience. Learning about the messages in the Word, understanding one’s tradition, and approaching societal needs with reason will prepare the way for a life in Christ, as a church and as a Christian pilgrim.

Our life experiences, our stories, are certainly part of our instruction and insight toward a developing spirituality. Our life experiences confirm hope and faith. And in addition to our own life stories we have Holy Scripture; messages from messengers, prophets, martyrs, and angels whose only intent was to prepare the way; to open hearts and minds. Our stories and the Gospel stories will prepare the way for Christ to come.

John the Baptist was noticeably different from other religious institutions of his day. His daily concern was to know and praise God before all things and all else of this world. He separated himself from and challenged the evil and hypocrisy of his day and lived a bit differently to show that his message was new, yet the same message that the prophets of long before him brought the people; help (salvation) was on its way.

Simplicity and effortlessness in method, meaningful welcome, preaching, teaching, and fervent prayer are the way to be a church. I believe it will prepare the way now, and for years to come. We will have prepared for and been the way of Christ.