

Advent 2

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Ellen K. Wondra

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Make his paths straight!

I do love Advent. And particularly this Sunday. The wonderful prophecy from Isaiah, so full of deep, deep longing and strong and confident hope. The Psalm with its promises that are filled with joyous anticipation and with confidence. Paul's assurance that God with Us is with *everyone*, not just those who have already received the promises of God. And John the Baptist, the prophet, the wild man dressed in camel fur, crying out to all who would hear—and so many *do* hear.

When I was a child and a teenager, I always found Christmas disappointing. Most Christmases were pretty wonderful, actually, and I really enjoyed being with my extended family. And I really loved a lot of the presents. Even the pajamas and socks. But it was never quite IT. And I didn't know what IT was. I just knew that the time leading up to Christmas and Christmas itself just didn't quite make it. They somehow were both wonderful and lacking something. And it wasn't until I read the Bible, and particularly passages like these, that I had any idea what IT was. The promises of God. Coming true. Not fully, but nevertheless. The promises of God, coming true.

So Advent has always been special to me, because it's a time of waiting, of anticipation, or looking around and knowing there's a "more" that's coming, and coming soon. Who knows? Maybe this year the Kingdom of God will break in more fully.

Maybe this year God with Us will come again, with "the spirit of wisdom and understanding,/ the spirit of counsel and might,/ the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."

Maybe this year God, with us, will "decide with equity for the meek of the earth;"

Maybe this year, "The wolf shall live with the lamb,/ the leopard shall lie down with the kid,/ the calf and the lion and the fatling together."

And maybe this year, the whole of humanity, in all its frailty and limitation, "will not hurt or destroy/ on all my holy mountain;"

That, after all, is what we hope for, what we long for, what we stretch ourselves toward. The promises of God coming true. They seem mostly impossible, things that human beings simply are not going to get around to doing—or at least so it seems, the older I get. But God has promised. And with God all things are possible. And so we hope. We long. We stretch toward this wonderful future that we know we cannot achieve on our own.

And in our hope, we pull that longed-for and promised future towards us, day by day. Perhaps we do that more fervently during Advent; that's at least part of why we spend so much time thinking about what gifts to give, and to whom: what meets the longings and desires of those around us, of those we love. Or maybe we're more aware of it in Advent. In any event, what we are doing is trying to Head into the Kingdom of God before the Kingdom comes.

We try to see the world as God sees it: full of grace and beauty and possibility but also full of broken-ness, and unnecessary harm and suffering, and want and separation.

We try to live into the world that God promises in how we view and approach others and—yes—ourselves.

We try to heal what is broken, and if not heal, at least abide with those who live in broken-ness. That is, we try to show up, and to take part, and refuse to disappear from the company of the sorrowful, the lost, the wounded, the despairing. The ones we don't know. The ones we do.

We try to protect and nurture joy, and delight, and fairness and justice. And hope. Hope, and confidence, its twin—the absolute and irreversible conviction that whatever it is that God is up to, it will always, somehow, lead to healing, and forgiveness, and wholeness—to God's Kingdom in all its fullness and rightness and joy.

And every bit of that is a preparation for the Kingdom, and an anticipation of it. But it's not the Kingdom itself.

So we hope. We wait. Just like John the Baptist, in a way. Because John is waiting, and hoping, and preparing. And most of all, he's pointing.

In much of medieval and Renaissance art, even at a great distance you can tell who's John the Baptist not because of his long wild hair and his camel hair clothing, though those provide good clues. No, you can tell it's John because he's pointing. Always. Clearly, emphatically pointing—and pointing away from himself and toward the One Who is to Come, towards Jesus, who brings in the Kingdom of God. He's pointing toward that future—towards that very specific future which is not going to be easy even for God to church. Often John is pointing toward the Crucified One, to the one whose very suffering and death and descent into hell are in such paradoxical ways the opening into the Kingdom of God.

John points, away from himself, towards Christ God with Us, because John knows, he *says*, that for all that what he says is a word from God, prophecy, foretelling and telling forth—and it is that—for all that, he's only the messenger. He points away from himself. There is one coming, but, John says, I am not that one. Listen to me, and get ready. Get ready. God is coming. Soon. Now. Into our midst. Where we are. God is coming.

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Getting ready, for John and for us, means not only hoping and longing and reaching and pulling God's promised future toward us. Getting ready is also about turning around—repenting—and taking a good hard look at ourselves and our world and being clear about what's going on. Because as good, as beautiful, as generous as this world can be—and it can—it's not the

Kingdom of God. Even with all that God is up to, in us and with us and despite us, this still isn't the Kingdom of God. And we know it.

So repent, says John. Turn around. Head in the right direction. See what God is up to bring in the Kingdom.

Repentance for us as individuals means recognizing that we're not as good as we think we are, we're not as just, as faithful, as generous, as loving as we could be. Or as we want to be. We know that. We may not say so out loud, or maybe not very often, but we know that we are frail and limited creatures whose even good intentions can lead to bad, even evil consequences.

And we know that our world is far from what it could be, even at its very best which is, after all, very good indeed. Still, even at its best—and the world is never, I think, at its best taken overall—the world, humankind, reality is far, far distant from what it could be and what it ought to be. Turning around—the meaning of the Greek word for repentance—turning around means taking a good, hard, truthful look. And then recalculating. Figuring out how to head ourselves and our communities and all that is around us in the right direction, which is not exactly *this direction*—but heading out, ahead, toward what it is that God is doing and what God has promised will surely come of that doing.

And that is hard and painful work, work that is never over. We get off track so easily, we humans. We become attached to things, to relationships, to ways of living and being that clearly are not the Kingdom of God, no matter how much we may treat them that way. We mistake what is good and true and holy and beautiful about the realities in which we live for what is ultimately good and true and holy and beautiful. So we have to give up our illusions, and sit looser with what comforts and fulfills us, and that's hard, hard work. It's the work of repentance, of turning around, of reorienting ourselves, again and again towards what's coming. Toward what God is doing. Towards the Kingdom.

And repentance, turning around, is not just about individuals. It's about organizations, and systems, and structures, and cultures. These two head in the wrong direction, all too often, and they take us with them. Systems and structures and cultures need to be turned around, and headed towards the Kingdom. The whole world needs to be turned around.

And that includes about the church. For the church, too, be it parish, diocese, or worldwide communion, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, needs, always, to take a good hard look at itself and where it is and where it is not contributing to the preparation for and coming of God's kingdom. We don't need to look far to see examples, some of them huge and horrifying and all too present. The church for all its goodness, all its holiness, all its fervent effort to be both just and faithful, always needs to look to where it's pointing, and figure out where we need to turn around too.

Because the Church is not the Kingdom. The Church anticipates the Kingdom. The Church always points to what God is up to and what God promises. The Church is like John the Baptist, always pointing away from itself and the good and true and holy ways it is in this world. All those things are real. But they are nevertheless always pointing—away, ahead, toward God with

Us, toward the Kingdom. The Church in the midst of everything always, always says, Prepare the way of the Lord!