

## **ONLY ONE PREPARATION NECESSARY FOR CHRIST'S ARRIVAL**

(MK 1:1-8) Sermon by the Rev. Corinne Hodges  
Sunday, December 7, 2008, St. John of the Cross

Preparations...one could say that Advent is a time for preparations. After all, we are getting ready for what many view as the biggest holiday of the year. Just think of all the things we do to prepare for Christmas:

- Purchase, address and send Christmas cards/e-mails
- Decorate homes
- Attire—purse for the whole month of Dec., ties, vests/sweaters, jewelry
- Bake cookies
- Buy and wrap gifts
- Many festive occasions

This certainly is a long list of to-dos for December 25. But the kind of preparation that we hear of in today's Gospel reading is drastically different. John the Baptist says "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

John the Baptist was the precursor to Jesus Christ. He prepared the world for the coming of Christ. And we hear in this reading how John, instead of drawing attention to himself, steers people to the one who is to come after him, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ. And in this way, John tells us also exactly where our attention should be this Advent season.

Our focus should not be on the frenetic activity or display of the Christmas season, but on the spiritual hope of Jesus Christ. It's pretty clear. There is no mention of any of the usual preparations we associate with Christmas today. No gift buying, card writing, no tree decorating or even carol singing. No, the only thing John tells us to do to prepare for Christ's arrival is to repent.

What does it mean to repent? In Hebrew and Greek, to repent is to change one's life, to turn it around. We do this as a response to God's forgiveness of us, God's generosity to forgive no matter what we do, great or small. But in some cases change can mean radical change, especially in the case of Christmas. Instead of focusing on all the externals of the season, John urges us to look inside into our hearts. The words from the prophet Isaiah are helpful. For we all have rough patches

in our lives that need to be smoothed out. If we want to be truly liberated like the people of Israel, if we seek true peace and union with God, we have to allow for the removal of those barriers. We have to let God lead us back home.

But how do we do this during a time of year when so many other things take priority? One thing we can learn from our Gospel message today has to do with the location of the story. John was in the desert when people sought him out to be baptized. These people were lured out of the busy city to the barren land. It was there that they were transformed by the words of John, a charismatic speaker, a bold and spirited man. And it was there in that unadorned place that the people could more easily see what was standing between them and God.

This change of scenery may be exactly what we too need this Advent. It may be necessary for us to leave behind the flashing lights, noise and crowds. We may need, even desire, a land of simplicity, where we can hear the messages God speaks to us. And God gives us plenty of time to sort things out in the wilderness. God is not in a hurry. For a thousand days to us is like one day in the eyes of God. God waits for all to turn around and be found.

It's quite timely that we hear this message of repentance in Advent, the beginning of the new church year. Many people wait until the secular new year to make resolutions of transformation, but John tells us we should not wait. Christ's second arrival could happen at any moment. If a thief came in the middle of the night, would we be prepared? If Christ came in the middle of the day and the end came to human life as we know it, would we be ready? How would Christ find us? Worried, filled with anxiety and regret, wishing we had made changes we could have? Or would God find us at peace with how we live, who we are and with what guides our lives?

In Advent, we bring out the blue vestments, symbolizing a new dawn, a new earth and a new beginning. This fresh start is our invitation to prepare by redirecting our lives. In what areas is God calling you to turn your life around and make a change? What are the rocks or boulders that stand between you and God, causing you to stumble or follow paths that are not safe, secure or life-giving? As we await

Christ's coming this Advent, may we smooth out the rough places in our hearts, easing the way for God to create glorious new life and a peaceful new world.