

“Preparing for the New”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent II – December 8, 2013

Isaiah 11: 1-10
Matthew 3: 1-12

So there I was last Sunday, leaving Lucas Oil Stadium after watching the Colts defeat the Titans. I walked up Capitol Street, under the railroad tracks, turned right at the Convention Center and headed up the steps to Pan Am Plaza. And along with hundreds of my fellow exuberant football fans, I encountered him – John the Baptist.

He wasn’t dressed in camel’s hair, and he wasn’t eating locusts and honey. He wasn’t standing beside a river, immersing people with a baptism of repentance.

In one hand he was holding a sign that read, “Repent – Jesus Is Coming.” In his other hand was a bullhorn, and into it he was speaking like he had had three espressos right before the end of the game, so he would be ready for his audience. He was shouting and preaching and saying we all should repent of our ways and find Jesus right now, before it was too late. A few people engaged him as they walked by, but most took a longer route around the plaza to get to their destination. And I wondered, as I heard his voice echoing long after I had passed him, how many others thought of John the Baptist at that moment, or thought that this guy was just another “crazy religious person,” interrupting the afterglow of their Sunday afternoon.

Every Advent, John the Baptist shows up on our doorstep. He doesn’t get a place in the traditional nativity scene like the shepherds or the wise men. But he’s always here, usually on the Second Sunday of Advent, reminding us how we are to prepare for the coming of God’s Kingdom through Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Unlike the modern-day John I encountered downtown on Sunday, Matthew’s description of John has him out in the wilderness, away from the masses of people. His purpose was foretold in Isaiah 40, as “The one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (3:3). Despite his appearance, despite his diet, despite his location, the people came: “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (3:6).

What led these people from the city and the surrounding region to a man crying out in the wilderness? It was something new, something different, something compelling which drew them to John. Were they empty inside with the direction their life was headed? Were they seeking guidance for a new direction – repentance literally means “to turn around” – which was the

opposite of their current direction? Were they seeking simplicity amid the crush of complexity they currently knew?

What causes us to hear, amid the noise of modern-day life, a call for moving in a new direction? A health crisis? The loss of a treasured relationship? A sense of emptiness deep in our soul? I sat with a gentleman in the community last week who had become so engrossed in his own life and success, he could not see how his marriage had fallen apart over the course of several years until his wife told him two weeks ago she wanted out. It's not that hard to fall into the abyss of self-saturation, and only when our blinders are removed are we able to recognize the path we are on is no longer aligned with God's path for our lives.

That is why it is so crucial that we hear John the Baptist every Advent Season. We can dress up the house and host the greatest holiday parties and buy the perfect gifts this Christmas. But if we have not turned toward God in our hearts, awaiting the Lord's arrival on Christmas, then all our preparations and activities are for not. John stands there – on Pan Am Plaza, within our families, at our workplace, in our conscience – and asks us, “Is this the path you are meant to travel? If not, confess, turn around, and genuinely prepare for the one for whom I'm not worthy enough to even carry his sandals.”

John teaches us how to prepare for the King of Peace. John reminds us that Advent is not just a countdown of days until Christmas, but a spiritual discipline filled with prayer, humility, and new hope for our individual and collective lives. John models for us that we can have all the trappings of life that we want, but ultimately we must possess a simple focus on God as our provider. John might not be in the crèche on Christmas Day, but his voice in the wilderness echoes the announcement of the angels that “to you is born this day a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

While John teaches us how to prepare for the new that is coming, Isaiah illustrates what that new might be in God's coming kingdom. In this beautiful, familiar passage from chapter 11, we have two distinct sections. The first, verses 1-5, speaks of the qualities of the new king who will come to Israel. This king will be blessed with a spirit that provides wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. In the creation story from Genesis, it states that “the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters” (2:1). It is this same spirit, *ruah* in Hebrew, which will reside with the king who will come out from the stump of Jesse.

This king will not judge by how the world sees or hears things, or as another translation puts it: will not judge by hearsay (Revised English Bible). He will judge with the best intent of the poor and the meek of the earth. The wicked will be put in their place, and righteousness and equity and justice shall mark this new king's reign. As John was clothed in a way to distinguish himself from others, so will this king be clothed with righteousness as a belt around his waist, and faithfulness as a belt around his loins (11:5).

The second half of this passage is a series of dichotomies which illustrate how different, even idyllic, this new kingdom will be. For any of us

who grew up on farms or around animals, we might believe this is a children's fairy tale rather than a prophetic vision from God. The wolf lives with the lamb, the leopard lies down with the kid goat, the calf and the lion and fatling are all together. The cow and the bear grazing together, instead of the bear eating the cow! The same with the lion, who eats straw like the ox. These dichotomies are so absurd and unbelievable, and it is for that very reason that God's new kingdom will be on a different path than anything the Israelites -- or we -- have ever known.

Perhaps the most vivid example is that a nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp. An asp is one of the most dangerous of snakes, and with it comes images of violence and death. But here, a child shall not be harmed or killed by what is perceived as a threat. And, as has earlier been illustrated in the dichotomies, it will be a little child who will bring this new hope into reality. There will be an end to violence and destruction on God's holy mountain -- because "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (11:9).

How is the church called to engage in this vision, to prepare for the new that God is bringing? How are we as individuals called to embrace this, not as a fairy tale, but as a vision that must come to fruition? Noel Erskine writes: *The church is not the kingdom of God, but its relationship to the kingdom signals its mission. The realm of God shines through the witness and mission of the church as the poor have good news preached to them and are judged with righteousness and equity. The Messiah awaits the church in a future of righteousness marked off by the gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of God, beckoning the church to a new future not of its own making but one made possible by Yahweh. The challenge is not to be stuck in the traditions of the past but to be open to the realm in which the proud will be punished, the humble will be exalted, and the practice of justice will be the order of a new day* (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 30).

The death of Nelson Mandela this week has caused us to pause and reflect on how God used this individual to effect tremendous change. In his life, he sought to bring justice and equity to the meek and oppressed. In his imprisonment, he never lost faith in his God or in humanity. In his release from prison and rise to leadership, he chose reconciliation over revenge, and in doing so God brought about a new reality in South Africa. The new can come, can happen, can change even the most hopeless of situations. And Madiba, as Mandela was known in his native country, is a powerful example of that hope.

These visions of John the Baptist and Isaiah are not fairy tales or pipe dreams. They are visions of a God who is willing to send his love in fragile, human form. Prepare for this new reality during Advent, so that your life might truly be transformed when the King of Kings arrives on Christmas Day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.