

The Second Sunday in Advent – 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

My beloved bride has a daily calendar in the bathroom. You know the type; each day has a saying that you read and ponder and helps you start the day. This particular calendar is for women. The sayings are all by ladies and they have ladies in view. Which is not to say that I don't check 'em out and think about them but they're not really directed at me. But there was one that was taped to my side of the mirror not too long ago. Clearly, the good-lady-wife thought that this one had something to do with me. It read: "An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have; the older she gets the more interested he is in her." That little bit came from Agatha Christie.

Now there were at least two ways that I could take this notice delivered to me by my dearest. I could take it as a compliment. She put it there because I personify the clever saying from Agatha Christie and she is very grateful. Or I could take it as a bit of good-natured encouragement. Mrs. Smith put it there to prompt a bit more of the archaeologist in me and for me to exhibit some growing interest in my wife of 33 years. The day for the saying was September 22nd. I have kept it ever since, pretty much right where I found it. Not a day has gone by since that I haven't looked at it, run its words through my head, and thought of her.

John the Baptist was out proclaiming the approaching kingdom. He was unruly, unkempt, and wild. There was alarm in His voice. He was sent by God. His job was to prepare the way. His job was to awaken Israel from its spiritual slumber and prompt them to make ready. Repent! That was John's message. The message was for the high and the low, the old and the young, the grossly sinful and the discreetly sinful. The kingdom of God was approaching. John was not interested in massaging their feelings or uttering banal platitudes or urging them to live their best life now. John called for action. "Repent" is an action word, a verb. To *feel* remorse is one thing. To take action to purposely align your life with God's will is way more important than how you feel. Some folks think that feeling bad about the ugliness in your life is penitence. Folks who think this way tend to leave their ugliness in place. These folks focus their religiosity on how they feel. John the Baptist would not be impressed.

If Christianity is not the principal thing that determines what you will do and what you will not do, then your faith is dead. A large part of addicts *wants* to keep engaging in their chosen indulgence, regardless of how guilty about it they may feel. Feeling bad after a bender is not repentance. Taking steps to clean up your life, regardless of how difficult those steps may be, that is a genuine reflection of the word "repent." Lip service is cheap. John the Baptist struck such alarm in his hearers that they were begging him to tell them how to show that they were truly repentant, begging him to tell them what behaviors align with God's will (Luke 3:10-14).

"Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). That is one of the most direct statements in all of Scripture and it comes out of John the Baptist's mouth. He prepares the way. That statement, taken to heart by believers, prepares people to receive the King when He comes. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. If you are prone to lying then go *out of your way* to tell the

truth... all the time. If you are a womanizer, if you lift up your eye to every female that crosses your path, then treat all women as your most prized sister, serve as a protector not a predator. If your mouth gossips with other mouths then *go out of your way* to defend your neighbor, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way. If you are stealing from your employer by being lazy, by being negligent in your duties then change your behavior to give a full and honest day's work. That is what it means to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

Such things are not empty spiritual exercises. This kind of action enlivens the mind to a pressing reality: Christ is near. The alarm in John's voice was to ensure that those who were his contemporaries would recognize Christ, embrace Christ when He came. "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:7-8). Prepare. John's voice is to ring through this holy house, ring in our era, ring in your heart. Christ is coming. His return could be at any moment. You do not know when. You postpone sincere acts of preparation at your own peril. When Christ returns, "two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:40-42). Left behind isn't staying back on this earth while others go to heaven. Left behind is being found faithless and consigned to hell. Faith wants to prepare. Faith will do anything to prepare. The faithless... not so much. Preparing; we've got to think about it every day.

An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have; the older she gets the more interested he is in her. It's a great saying – so clever, so whimsical – I get a kick out of it every time I think of it. How many of y'all believe that your faith is deepening? How many of y'all believe that the older you get the richer your trust becomes, the fuller your understanding of God and His ways gets? I would suggest to you that this is *exactly* the way that it should be, the way that God has designed it. You who are here today are here in the face of a months-long pandemic. Irrespective of how threatening you believe it to be, you are here, in this Divine Service, to sit at Christ's feet and receive His gifts. Fear has been pumped into you through the media, restrictions have tumbled out of the governor's mansion, and yet you are here – in God's house, hearing His Word, and availing yourself of His body and His blood. The older you get the more attuned to His Word you become. The older you get the more interested you are in Jesus and His Life. That interest compels you to be prepared for His return.

Prepared; now turn the word around. Prepared – how was salvation prepared for you? God the Father gave His Eternal Son a body. Your salvation was prepared for you, apart from your works. Jesus said this: "Sacrifices and offering you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me" (Hebrews 10:5). Your salvation was prepared by God Himself being conceived and born – true God and true man – in a fleshly body. That body was prepared so that He might offer Himself as a sacrifice on the holy cross, a sacrifice for your sins. His body is the source of your baptism. His blood, His holiness, His death and His resurrection – you were washed in Him, cleansed and given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Prepared; you and your salvation has been prepared.

Marianne Anderson had a place prepared for her. As she grew older, her interest in biblical archaeology increased. She found the Scriptural comfort of Christ (Isaiah 40:1). Jesus spoke

tenderly to her in His word (Isaiah 40:2). Like a faithful lamb, she hearkened to her Good Shepherd's voice. Marianne's iniquity was pardoned by a loving Savior (Isaiah 40:2). **He** was supremely interested in **her**. He prepared her place in this vibrant congregation. Here, Marianne contributed to our family of faith by her labors of love. She worked. She gave – to us individually and to the congregation as whole. But it was God who prepared her soul for heaven by nurturing her faith with the sweet words of the Gospel. Jesus prepared her soul for heaven by feeding her with His body and blood. Her humility was genuine. She knew that she was nothing more than a poor, miserable sinner. She loved Christ the King. She was at home in this place. She is more at home now. Christ prepared for her the crown of life by wearing His crown of thorns. Her life in heaven has begun. For now, we prepare.