

Call to Worship

From Isaiah to John the Baptist to the Evangelist Mark, the message comes, loud and clear: As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the savior. Make the paths straight!'" **What a winding, twisting road still lies ahead of us. Cookies to bake, packages to wrap, cards to send, plans to make, people to see, travel to tread . . .**

And Jesus? Can you prepare a way for the good news of Jesus Christ? Can you level the barriers, straighten your calendar, save a place for the savior in your heart? **We need a beacon, a shining light, to call to us always, to warn us, to warm us, to worm its way into our sight!**

Prayer of Invocation

**Christ be with us, Christ stand by us, light of Christ before us always.
Like a beacon, like a signpost, speaking through us, speaking in us,
Singing of our heart's desire, come once more and dwell among us. Amen.**

The Word

Mark 1:1-8

Common English Bible

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah: ***Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, a voice shouting in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight."***¹

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. **Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins.**

John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. **He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

Living the Word

In 1980 Heinz Ketchup bought the rights to use Carly Simon's song "*Anticipation*" for a commercial. The song had already made it on the top charts, a few years before, but Carly had just had her first baby and decided she wasn't going to record any more. Since then she has gone on to record many albums, while raising her family of daughter Sally and later, son Ben.

For a star music writer and artist to give the rights of one of their well known songs for commercial use can forever change the meaning of that song, and it can make or break the commercial. Fortunately, for both Carly and the Heinz Company, it became again, a big hit!

Do you remember it? As the ketchup took it's time getting out of the bottle, Carly's slow draw on the word 'an-ti-ci-pa-a-tion is keeping me waiting. This was, of course before the squeeze bottle was around. This was the wait for the glass bottle to let go of the thick tomato goodness inside. We want the ketchup to 'dress-up' the food we are about to eat. For most of us it isn't to cover the taste of the food before us, but to enhance it. The ketchup is a way to prepare the meal according to our tastes.

As with the ketchup, we are in a waiting time for Christmas. We know it's coming, we have begun to shop and decorate and eat special cookies, but it is only Dec 17th, so there is still some time until the day. How do we use the waiting times?

Gladys and Fred were at the breakfast table. After Fred's first bite of oatmeal he made a sort of funny face. Gladys says: "I thought I would surprise you with something different this morning...John the Baptist Oatmeal! I've wanted to make it for some time, but you wouldn't believe how hard it is to find locust!"

John the Baptizer, was a sort of an oddball. He wore camel's hair with a leather belt and he ate locust and wild honey; your typical 'live off the land' kinda guy. Definitely unique! But people responded to his message, because they could see that it was genuine and 'of God.'

His message was one of repentance. Prepare yourself, for the Messiah is to come. Remember they had been waiting for many centuries for the promised Messiah. His words showed urgency. They heard that in his words. His actions were to baptize the people who would come, helping them to prepare their hearts for Christ, by repenting of the past and making themselves ready for what was to come, soon.

How would you prepare others for the coming of Christ? We don't have to eat or dress like John to prepare the way of the Lord. Several years ago, I had a confirmation student named Mike, who told me that his winter sport was Curling. I assured him I had heard of it, but wasn't too familiar with it. I asked if I could come and watch. He shrugged his shoulders and said "There isn't much to watch."

I made a point of going. On my first visit I was confused and had to will myself to stay for the whole game. I didn't get the scoring, I didn't understand the different player positions and jobs. It was a slow and tedious game. But I was determined to be an encourager, so I went home and did some research.

The sport began in medieval Scotland. There is a 'stone' slid slowly across the ice to a target. In the early days of curling, when games were played outside on the frozen locks, snow and other debris had to be cleared from the path of the moving stones. Similar to the need we have in preparing our hearts and souls to clear the debris, and help others by clearing debris that gets in the way of Christ coming in.

So in curling there is a 'sweeper' who brushes a path for the stone to reach its goal. As the sport of Curling evolved, it became clear that in addition to clearing the debris, vigorous sweeping affected the movement of the stone. Sweeping makes the stone travel farther. Sweeping makes the stone travel straighter. Sweeping does not make the stone travel faster. When we clear a path for the coming of Jesus, Christ can reach farther and go out straighter. Even so, God's timing isn't ours, so it may not be faster.

The best sweepers today are effective and efficient. In a debate forty years ago, many argued that the most effective sweeping comes from the rapid movement of the brush in front of the stone; others argued that effective sweeping is caused by increased pressure of the brush on the ice in front of the stone. More effective preparation for us may mean many different techniques. 'Rapid movement' and 'increased pressure' sounds a lot like Advent to me. For others effective preparation may be silence.

When asked "What is love?" a six year old girl responded: "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen." (Repeat)That statement is pretty effective in clearing the path to Christ. My understanding now is that the best sweeping techniques are to have a strong balance of both effectiveness and efficiency.

Look over your preparations this year to see if they are clearing a path for Christ. Are you efficient with the gifts and blessings you have been given? What would be your words to others? Advent is a time of preparing our hearts and our souls along with our Christmas tree and cookies.

The people of Israel knew a lot about waiting for God, but their confidence in God had all but disintegrated. When we read these scriptures we become onlookers and the Advent season opens us to the need for God to break into our lives. How we receive and react to the waiting is up to us. Some waiting is passive waiting. But there is also active waiting.

If a person waits on a street corner for a bus, that could be passive waiting. But if the same person on the same corner hears the sound of a band marching up the street, yet out of sight it can be a different kind of waiting, full of expectation, a waiting on tiptoe, an active waiting.

As the ice goes out on the rivers and lakes it is a slow burden for the fisherman, waiting on Spring because it is passive waiting; but waiting for the fish to take his bait once the time has come, becomes active waiting. "A watched pot never boils." Well that isn't true, but it isn't very efficient or effective to stand and stare at the pot – definitely passive waiting...

When I didn't know the game of curling, I ended up doing some uncomfortable passive waiting, but when I cleared the path of the unknown, it became active waiting, because I took time to clear a path to understanding. With the new knowledge I watched the next Winter Olympics Curling Matches with great anticipation.

Active waiting does include tapping the side or the bottom of the glass ketchup bottle. Active waiting might include listening and praying. We are called to active waiting in this time of Advent. Not just a "lists, lists, scurry, scurry, eat, eat" kind of frenzy, but clearing the way in anticipation of all that God has for us; clearing the path in your own heart and soul for others, and especially for the coming of Christ.

We need to sweep all of the debris, so we may experience the wonder of Christ as the preparations of Advent continue. When we take time to worship, here and elsewhere, may we clear a path for Christ to enter our hearts once again. In anticipation of the days ahead, I will share with you a prayer entitled: "*The Season of Promise*" written by Rev. Karen Ebert, of Wausau Wisconsin.

We turn to God now, to lift up together,
what each of us longs for alone, and what all of us long for as one.
Blessed are you, Lord God of Israel.
You have done great things for us, and have promised even greater.
May our hearts be glad.

In this season of responsibilities by the list
Of shopping and decorating and baking and mailing,
We can be overcome by hassles and bother and chaos.

So God, in the season of wonder lost in details,
We pray that you will come to call us again,
grab our attention, and lift our eyes to the quiet skies
To listen again for the words of angels.

How hard it is to believe the messages they bring:

That our prayers, however crazy, might be answered;
That promises, however old, are not forgotten;
That your love, no matter how we've tested it, still holds fast;
That no matter how mundane or vicious our world might become,
You still yearn to enter it, and dwell among us.

Like Zechariah, we have our doubts. We have our doubts.

But if it were really true –

If these things are really true...
The possibility leaves us...speechless.

If it is true that you hear our wildest prayers,

Then maybe there is hope
That the illness that eats our bodies might find healing;
That our children will grow up in a world without fear;
That peace may come to [the whole world;]
That plenty may fill even the cores of our biggest cities.

If it is true that your love for us, though strained, is not broken by our sin,

Then perhaps we can find hope
That even if we have strayed from a life of a disciplined spirit,
You have followed, and remained close enough to touch;
That despite the heinousness of the crimes we commit against each other,
We may find a way to forgive each other, and build again.

If it is true that your promises of prophets long ago are not forgotten,

Then perhaps, just perhaps,
we may yet find that the presence of Christ has come to transform our world this Christmas,
We may yet discover Christ, in some least expected place.

If it is true...we have hope. May it be true, God.

It is for these things we find hard to believe, that we [keep praying.]Amen.