

Michael Gehring
“Prepare”
Luke 3: 1-20
Main Street UMC
Kernersville, NC
December 16, 2018

I invite you to open your Bibles. Last Sunday’s lectionary text was Luke 3: 1-6 and today’s is Luke 3: 7-18. We also read verses 19 and 20 to give some context and to demonstrate that not everyone is looking to welcome the king. Both lectionary texts for the 2nd and 3rd Sunday in Advent are about John the Baptist’s message. And the first thought about this is, *“umm, this is kind of strange. This doesn’t connote that American warm and fuzzy holiday feeling.”*

Luke 3:2 tells us the word of God came to this odd man. Out in the wilderness, he preached a message of repentance and of preparing one’s heart to receive the coming Messiah. Talk of a coming Messiah in the first century was risky, for with it came all the possible overtones of a new political ruler. Talk of a new king was dangerous business, with the implication being one kingdom rising and another kingdom crumbling.

The crowds came out into the wilderness for reasons they didn’t even understand, pulling away from their routine to hear this man promising change, demanding change, threatening change.

This is an odd text for Advent isn’t it? John said, *“Prepare your hearts for the coming of the Messiah?”* John wasn’t talking about preparing for baby Jesus. Jesus is full grown when John appears in the wilderness. Just what does this lectionary text have to do with Advent? It seems like a better text for the beginning of Lent, doesn’t it?

When I lived in Ashe County, I’d frequently stop by St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Beaver Creek, and I’d sit there meditating on the frescoes by Ben Long, the Statesville native. Long does a great job portraying the wildness of John the Baptist. He’s not some mega-church protestant preacher, so refined and so polished. The Baptizer had wilderness in his voice like a coyote’s howl. In Ben Long’s fresco, John the Baptist is standing there barefoot, his mid-section wrapped with a cloth. He’s got an unkempt bushy beard, wild like his hair, and he’s holding a wooden staff. I was tempted to dress that way myself today to help you all get you really engaged with the biblical text but in the end, I was afraid people would flee the sanctuary. I chose to stick with the robe. There are two other frescoes in that church as well: the center one is Jesus upon the cross with the resurrected Lord towering above and behind him. On the left is Mary,

pregnant, looking like a young woman peasant. Long captures the expectation of the coming of Jesus as a babe and, with John's proclamation, as a Messiah.

When I was growing up, every Sunday, we would proclaim, *Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again!* It was that 3rd line that haunted my imagination. Christ will come again, not as babe in the manger, not as a man upon the cross, but the trumpet will sound, the skies part, and the king of kings will return saying "*It's closing time you'll. Line up, and let the judgment begin.*" Okay, that's a paraphrase; you won't actually find that in the New Revised Version.

We know what the people in the 1st century didn't know that the Messiah did not institute a political kingdom but a spiritual kingdom. And the spiritual kingdom is more permanent than any earthly kingdom could ever be.

How do we prepare for Advent? As a people who know that Christ will return, the skies will part, the trumpet blast and the king of kings will usher in a new age.

So many people end the holiday season, frantic, worn-out, and tired from all the parties, gift giving, and celebrations. I'm truly amazed at how gift giving has almost taken over the holiday season, that it has become a festival of materialism. I love the title of Mike Slaughter's book *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday*. Things will never quench the taste of eternity in your soul. Isn't it time that we leave the trappings of materialism behind and start hoping for a new day?

C.S. Lewis had a great line in the sermon; "The Weight of Glory". Lewis said, "*We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea.*"

Many years ago, I was back at my Seminary for continuing education. And I walked to Nassau Street to grab lunch and as I was waited for the food, I flipped through *the New York Times*. My eyes fell upon a story about Eleanor Boyer. She was a woman who lived out many of our dreams but did something remarkably different. Her friends and parishioners wondered why she missed the 7:30 am Mass. She never missed. Right before the 9 am Mass, Ms. Boyer came into the church. *The New York Times* described her as "*an indomitable 72-year-old woman in a mustard velour cap with a gray raincoat.*" She "*strode into the Roman Catholic Church, stole a quick hug from the pastor, Msgr. J. Nevin Kennedy, and turned to face the wall of flashbulbs and television cameras.*" The media had all turned out because she had just won the 11.8 million-dollar New Jersey Lotto. She said to the

media, *“My car’s in the shop. I had to get a ride with somebody. Now that’s enough, all right? I want to pray a little bit.”*

The media was there because they were flabbergasted. They couldn’t quite understand someone like her. To win an 11.8 million-dollar lottery, and not head off to the Rivera, or buy a new car, a new house, or even a Books and Beverage store in the Caribbean. Ms. Boyer simply never had any doubt about what to do with that money. She gave half of it away to her church in which she has worshiped her whole life. The church became her family. She never married and never had any children. She gave the other half to be split between the town rescue squad, the volunteer fire department, and some other worthy groups in her town.

She said simply, *“No new car, no vacation. My life is no different. I’ve given it up to God. I live in his presence and do His will, and I did that from the start.”*

I wish I could tell you that day in the Annex so long ago, I thought *“Way to go Ms. Boyer!”* Truth to be told I thought, *“crazy old woman. Crazy old fool. Does she know what she’s done?”*

Then it hit me. Ms. Boyer doesn’t have to level any mountains and fill in any valleys to prepare the way of the Lord; All is well with her soul. The Lord already lives there. He already dwells in the Cathedral of her heart.

With spiritual giants like Ms. Boyer, we ask ourselves, just how do we prepare for the coming of the Lord?