

Be Prepared! By Sharon Hammill

Intro:

A week ago Thursday, was Thanksgiving day. Now how many of you in the congregation prepared Thanksgiving meal? How many of you went out to eat? You guys were probably the smart ones. It takes a lot to prepare for a meal of that proportion even if you are not doing all the cooking...You have to clean your house extra more than usual, you have to pick and or “hide “ the clutter, get the yard looking good—rake leaves, mow grass...It is a lot of hard work. We want to “get ready” to prepare for the coming of our guests. As hard as I worked Thanksgiving, I am not sure what I am going to do for Christmas!

Jan Fuller Carruthers spoke in a commentary about this “preparing” we do during the Advent season. She says they like to play the dinner guest game and talk who they would like to come to dinner at their house. They have suggested Queen Elizabeth or Robert Redford, but she says that the most interesting conversation comes when they suggest Jesus. She goes on to say “..if Jesus came, I’d really have to clean the place. The latter thought gives me such pause, rather akin to despair, that I attempt to talk the family out of these delightful invitations.” (Abingdon’s Women’s Preaching Annual Year C, pg 19) She goes on to express her concern over her lack of desire for housekeeping done when “I’m seized with anxiety, desperation, confusion, or when friends are coming over. (I’ve also been known to invite people over so we have to straighten). Now I have to concur with Jan. I too do not have that high calling of housekeeping..Ted can attest to that. I too am seized to go into a frenzy when the time comes for friends and relatives are scheduled to come to my house and I am quite embarrassed some days when unexpected visitors arrive. I need to always be prepared for that unexpected guest..

Our scripture lesson today focuses around an interesting character, John the Baptist. Now if you will remember, John has ties to Jesus. His mother Elizabeth conceived at an older age and was pregnant with John at the same time

Mary was pregnant with Jesus. His father Zechariah was silenced when he didn't believe until after John's birth. John was the cousin of Jesus.

One commentary I read described John as a charismatic Jew. I think that is an interesting description. Judaism was so much about the law and following the law but not really about much else. John took this one step further. He went to the wilderness, a place where Israel had been. He called out to the people. He baptized them with water to prepare for the one who would baptize them with the spirit.

Dr. Wiley Stephens, Methodist minister in GA, describes John the Baptist in this manner: "John the Baptist, who speaks out in our Gospel this day, was one of the most colorful characters in all history. He wore a camel hair coat long before that became fashionable. His diet consisted of locust and wild honey. And his marketing techniques weren't the best in all history. He went out into the wilderness, away from the city, away from the crowds, to attract a great crowd. He seemed almost determined to fail. Despite all these things we would call poor marketing, Matthew tells us that people from all over the region were flocking to hear his message." (Uncluttering, pg 1)

And what was his message? He took the message of Isaiah in Luke 3:4 when he said: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." As John spoke to those who were once in the wilderness of Babylon, this was a message of hope and a message of being prepared, of repenting, of seeing the salvation of God." Yes John would have probably made a good Pentecostal preacher. John says you have been in the wilderness and there is one who is coming to once again help you re-establish this relationship with God and God will save you.

Now this message of salvation may be a little disturbing to some of you sitting in this congregation today. We don't normally get into this talk of repentance, acceptance and salvation. However, I going to give you a little forewarning, I am going to somewhat go there today. It's not going to be a turn

before you burn type message but a time to reflect on our own spiritual housekeeping..being prepared, repenting, making ready for that special guest to come.

John the Baptist ask us to “Prepare the way of the Lord.” What does that mean? How do we prepare. We do need to make a spiritual inventory of ourselves. Ask ourselves, are we doing the things that would be pleasing in the sight of God? Are we acting in a manner of kindness, compassion, and love to not only those we know, but those we don’t know, and to the even tougher challenge those we don’t like or consider our enemies? Are we living the life that is pleasing to God? Giving not only of ourselves, but what we have so others may have. Not judging others for what they do, what they believe, their different lifestyles that may not be exactly like ours. Do some of these things sound familiar to you? Do they make you squirm in your seat?

What are you going to do about it? John the Baptist says through the words of Isaiah that we must “repent.” Now that is a tough word. If we repent it must mean we are doing something wrong..Well folks, I don’t know about you, but I think I need to do a little repenting today. What exactly is repentance? Rev. Amy Richter describes it this way:” Repentance is an act of turning around, going a new direction, a change of heart, a change of mind, rather than continuing down the same path, moving in the same direction that is leading to nowhere or somewhere dangerous, fast.” She goes on to say “Repentance is not the same as remorse or regret. It is not list all the ways things could have gone differently. It is not wishing you were a better person, that some things had never happened, that bad things wouldn’t keep happening to you. It’s not feeling guilty or ashamed. It’s not feeling afraid. It’s not something that leaves us stuck or standing still, or spinning in circles, going nowhere. Repentance is about movement, letting yourself be grasped by God, getting new bearings and relying on God for direction.” (Sermons that work, pg 2) Rev. Richter does a wonderful job describing here what we have to do for repentance..move forward, be grasped by God, get new bearing and rely on God to direct us..

And the result? The scripture tells us “and all flesh will see the salvation of God.” This is the tough part of this, “what is the salvation of God?” When God does move us forward, changes our direction, when we rely on God to direct us, will we not be a part of that ever encompassing saving Grace of God. God does have saving grace. God’s saving grace keeps us going each day. God’s saving grace keeps us on that right road. God’s saving grace is for everyone. If we choose to repent, to move forward, be grasped by God, and follow God’s direction, that is our step in accepting that saving grace. We will see the salvation of God. We will live the salvation of God. We will share our love of God with our neighbor, our co-worker, and even our enemy. We will accept people for who they are and not be quick to judge. We will share our resources and pray for those who need our prayers for peace, for healing, for forgiveness, for hope.

No, we don’t normally have an altar call in this church, but today is communion and you will come forward to the altar, and as you do partake in this bread and this wine as a remembrance of Jesus’ death on the cross, I ask you to take a moment to become spiritually prepared, to take a moment to repent if needed, to change direction, to make a movement, to be grasped by God and to let God direct you as you prepare your hearts for the coming of Christ this holiday season. So my message is be prepared!