

2nd Advent – yr B 2020^(New London 2017< St. Mark's)
December 6, 2020
Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85; 2nd Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Grace, peace and blessings to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Twenty-one years ago, Sue and I were visiting in Northbrook, a suburb of Chicago. The occasion for the visit was the birth of our youngest grandson. Our daughter-in-law, Devon, was scheduled to give birth by cesarean section at 11am so we hustled to the hospital in Northbrook only to be told that the operation would be delayed until 1pm due to factors beyond the control of the hospital. So we waited. Then we got word that the delay would be until 3pm. So, we waited some more.

While Sue stayed at the hospital with Devon's mother, I was assigned to go to the house and stay with the older brother, Sam, soon to be 4 years old. I was also the designated switchboard operator to answer anxious inquiries from family, friends and neighbors. Finally, little Michael was born around 6pm. The waiting was frustrating and exasperating. But it was worth the wait. The result was wonderful – 8lbs,16ozs. By the way he is not so little now. He stands 6 feet 6inches, weighs about 240.

As I reflected on that experience, I couldn't help thinking about Advent and how we are encouraged to use the time while we wait for Christ. The traditional idea is first to wait not only for the celebration of birth of Jesus in Bethlehem while at the same time to not loose heart while waiting for the promised return of Christ. The reading from the second letter of Peter tries to explain to the people why waiting was so important. At the time when Peter composed his letter, the people expected Christ would return at any moment so their waiting was filled with impatience mixed with anxiety and not a little bit of fear.

But Peter points out that time, as we know it, has no real meaning for God. Peter writes, "with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand days are like one day." Think about it. If was accept that statement literally, then, in one sense, in God's time, it has been only two days since Jesus was born in Bethlehem. With God time is unrelated to the movement of the hands of the clock on the wall.

But Peter's statement is not to be read literally. It is a way of saying that in eternity time has no significance. Just to check my memory, I looked up the definition of the word "eternity." It means time that has no end. Eternity means timelessness. Or to say it another way, eternity is where the human concept of time does not apply. So, if the fulfillment of Christ's return seems a little off schedule, it's not our schedule that matters. It's God's schedule and God's schedule may reflect divine patience. A patience deeply grounded in love for all people to give everyone every possible chance to come to repentance so none will perish, as it says in the second sentence of that reading.

We cannot predict the "Day of the Lord" - that day or time when Christ returns and renders judgment and brings the faithful to himself. Like a thief in the night he will come when we least expect it, when our guard is down. It will come with stealth; it will be a surprise when we have become impatient with the delay and begin to forget God in our daily lives. We have to continually remind ourselves to persist in our faith, that it is God's time we are living in. God has a plan to save his people. Our job is to trust God and try to remain faithful.

But if we don't believe with all our being that God loves us and wants nothing more than to have solid, loving relationship – if we don't believe that, we are, in effect saying that we do not

trust God and then we are, in fact, lost. And if that's the case, we might correctly ask, "what's the point?" We might as well eat, drink and make merry for this is all there is!

But God says, "No way! There is a point! I have a plan to save you and all you are asked to do is make an effort – just try." The famous Russian composer of the 19th century, Igor Stravinsky, wrote a musical composition that contained a particularly difficult violin passage. After it had been rehearsed for several weeks, the violinist who was assigned to play the solo part, approached the great composer and apologized for his mistakes but added that the passage was too difficult. Stravinsky had a rather strange reply. He said, "I realize that. But please understand, what I am after is the sound of someone trying to play it."

Advent is a short, four-week season of the church year but it is a terribly important season for our spiritual growth. While we wait, we are to prepare ourselves spiritually. Some people understand prepare to mean to get the tree decorated and the Christmas shopping done. And we have to do that, too, but the preparation that is meant is spiritual preparation. It's the time for us to examine our relationship with Christ – our church attendance, our prayer life, our scripture reading, our concern for others who may be hurting, and so forth. God is brimming over with love for people and desperately wants our love in return.

But God won't force us to submit. One way to begin is to keep in mind that well known verse in the gospel of John, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life." (3:16) We have to make that choice. God has done what he can do. It's up to us to step out in faith. We won't be able to play the piece perfectly but all God wants is the sound of someone honestly and authentically trying. Our focus, therefore, should not be on the date and time of Christ's return, but preparing for his coming into our lives again this year at Christmas.

Which is what the person we call John the Baptizer was all about. Much is made of John's eccentricity – his clothing, his diet, his wilderness hangout. Eccentric means to deviate from conventional ways, to be off center. This was precisely the point. John not only didn't dress like the religious leaders dressed, he didn't live where they lived, he didn't teach as they taught and he didn't encourage people to follow their way of thinking. He was about as far away from the established religion of the temple in Jerusalem as he could get. He was what we might call "counter cultural."

And it was from his vantage point in his wilderness that he was calling people to prepare the way like the reading from the prophet Isaiah said. He was to prepare the way so the Lord could come into their lives. Most people, probably all people, who come to church, even if only occasionally, want a sense of the holy in their lives. They want to experience God. There are ways to do this that have stood the test of time. John assumed the listeners knew what he meant when he said make ready. But what if they don't know how to "make ready?" What if they don't know the process. To make ready is not a passive process.

It is not waiting for God to do it all. It's like I said before. We have a significant part to play in being ready. It's an active effort. It means intentionally and deliberately setting aside time in one's day for God. Like was mentioned before it may mean turning off the TV and opening the Bible. A great way to get started is to read the scripture passages listed in the Daily Office beginning on page 937 of the Prayer Book. The Lord can't reach our souls if we are not prepared.

Making ready begins when we decide to seek Jesus' way for our lives rather than trying to construct a way using our own imperfect knowledge. This is not easy for some people to hear. Those of us who might remember President Harry S Truman know that he was either loved or hated. There seemed to be no middle ground. He was called "Give 'em hell Harry" for his

tendency to speak his mind in a straightforward way. One time he was quoted as saying, “I never give them hell. I just tell them the truth and they think it is hell.” Like Harry Truman, John the Baptizer got on some people’s nerves by telling them things they didn’t want to hear.

John was the herald of the new thing God was doing. He was the prophet pointing toward the coming of the Christ of God, the long-expected Messiah. His underlying message was about “hope” because hope is faith looking toward the future. Hope is the sure and certain knowledge that God has defeated the forces of evil that cause people to distrust God and to regard the future with fear and apprehension. But the future is in God’s trustworthy hands. And that, my friends, means that love will prevail.

The faith that John the Baptizer proclaimed was that God was active in human time and was in the process of restoring all people to the proper relationship with their creator. John was convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God’s promise would be fulfilled. The promise would not be fulfilled by a vengeful God with fire and brimstone. No, it would be by God who says, “Comfort, O comfort my people.” God is a god of creating new things – making something out of nothing; a thing God does very well. A God worth spending our lives with.

No one has a right to call anyone to repentance unless he or she offers a more excellent way. John knew he offered that more excellent way in and through Jesus. The call of John today is no different from the call of John in his own time, a call to get on the band wagon. God has a cure for a sin sick world. The new treatment is at hand. Our only task is to reach out for it. We have to wait. There’s a baby worth waiting for. AMEN