

"HOUSECLEANING" - Advent II
Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee
An interpretation of W. A. Poovey's message
on Mark 1:1-8

We all know the importance of housecleaning. Especially when it doesn't get done. I'm told there was a day when the thought of housecleaning sent shivers up and down people's spines. It meant that heavy rugs had to be hauled outside and beaten, mattresses aired, curtains washed and stretched, and many other unpleasant tasks.

Today housecleaning isn't quite so strenuous. Modern fabrics and cleaning methods have eased the task. But the practice of periodically waging a war against dirt is still a good one -- not only for homes but also for lives. Dirt accumulates everywhere and needs to be removed.

John the Baptist was a housecleaning preacher. He came to stir up a revival in Israel, to call on men to wash away the stains and ugliness of sin. His words were abrasive, His appearance hardly neat. But his whole ministry was aimed at making Israel conscious of the need for cleansing and repentance.

John's story is fitting for Advent - since Advent seeks to remind us of the need for housecleaning in our lives. Being a Christian, of course, is no guarantee of permanent perfection or holiness. Daily events soil our lives and fill our hearts with ugliness. Selfishness creeps in. Lust rears its ugly head. Hatred and envy nibble at our righteousness. Because of our weakness, there is no miracle detergent for life -- to live is to get dirty and soiled by the contacts of life.

Our basic struggle then is: How can we keep clean? By isolation -- COMMENT. Isolation is a cop out. There is no escape from dirt. Only cleansing will purge our lives from ugliness and sin.

The Bible is a constant reminder of this. It

tells the story of many good and pious men, people like Abraham and David and Simon Peter and Paul.

But always there are unpleasant episodes in the lives of these people. David was an adulterer. Abraham a liar. Peter denied his Lord. Paul quarreled with his colleagues. We may think it would have been more kind to have omitted these unpleasant stories, but the Bible writers had a purpose in recording this material. Every description of weakness in the life of a godly man is a reminder to us that all men need cleansing.

And that is the message of John the Baptist. Repent. Wash. Be clean. John called the people of Israel to a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He spoke with boldness against evil wherever he found it, even when his words offended the ecclesiastical and civil authorities. And if his words have any meaning to us today, they should be heard as a clear call for us to clean house too. The Advent season should be a time for repentance, for soul-searching, for new resolves and new holiness.

Of course cleansing is not a once a year event for a man's heart any more than housecleaning should take place only on some special occasion. The Christian is to die daily to sin, that is, put away each day the evil that has crept in. But there is a need for special times of housecleaning, times for looking carefully at our lives and seeing what has happened to our high ideals. Such an effort can be very humiliating but also worthwhile. The Advent call to repentance is addressed to every Christian.

Yet there is a danger in housecleaning. A house is made to be lived in, and while it may be necessary to move furniture here and there for periodic scrubbing, it must all be put back so that life can be re-

sumed. Otherwise the effort is a barren one. In one of his parables Jesus warns us against cleansing a heart and then failing to put something in place of the dirt. To drive out the demon and leave the heart empty is to invite seven other demons to move in and occupy the emptiness.

Cleansing our hearts at Advent then is important only when it is followed by increased love for our Lord Jesus. John the Baptist would have been a footnote in human history if he had not also been proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. His work was preparation, but it was preparation for a very special event. So it is the positive message that is important. The Lord draws near. The one who is mightier than John is coming. In harmony with this, we are to cleanse our hearts and lives so that we can be filled with the good news of the gospel.

Too often Christianity puts the emphasis on the negative, on the housecleaning. Men talk about the need to get rid of sin, or they measure their faith by the things that they don't do. The world's picture of a Christian is often that of a man who doesn't drink, smoke, swear, or tell dirty stories. But that's only the housecleaning side of our faith. Paul had the true picture when he spoke of Christ living in him so completely that the ^{ugly} man Paul virtually ceased to exist. *That* is the Advent message. God has given us something better than dirt to fill our lives. He has given us Christ.

The Advent message sounds again today. It urges us to turn the searchlight of God's truth into the dark corners of our life and to cleanse each corner from the dirt that lies there. But the goal of Advent

is summed up in that little song most people learned in Sunday School or Bible School:

Come into my heart, come into my heart,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.
Come in today, come in to stay.
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.

ADVENT II (Cycle C)
Redeemer Lutheran Church
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
December 9, 1973

"THE PREPARATIONS HAVE BEGUN"

"I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring ~~it~~ to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:6

The preparations have begun. Christmas greetings fill our mail boxes. Santa is making his list, and checking it twice. Christmas tree lights are again descending from the attic. Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" croons a welcome contrast for old time radio fans. Salvation Army bells jingle under the octopus greens of Wisconsin Avenue. Christmas inventories decrease as bedroom closets get filled. Party plans become a priority. And even smiles are seen behind the breathy vapors of Christmas crowds. Yes, there is an IMMENSE amount of excitement and preparation that goes into Christmas.

And ^{yet} when Dec. 25th and Jan 1st have come and gone, these preparations will have been completed -- finished for good. Yes, these preparations have begun -- and they will ^{quickly} come to an end.

But another preparation has begun as well. There is even greater immensity of preparation in this case. For this preparation began thousands of years ago.

It began with instructions to man, then and now known as Adam and Eve. The instructions remain the same today - they prepare us for choosing and making decisions *of obedience.*

Then followed Abraham, who was prepared for an adventure into the unknown -- an adventure which came to be known as covenant. Soon after came the preparations for entering a promised

land -- and just for insurance sake, Ten Commandments were ~~observed~~ ^{observed} so that there would be a guiding source for continued preparations.

Then arose prophets who proclaimed a preparation for an anointed king from God. They stated that the people should prepare the way for this Lord. And then the fullness of time came, and God sent forth himself in infant form. And God's preparations were complete -- and yet, they had just begun!

Complete, because God's love had reached fullness in Jesus Christ. Yet, just begun, because his love was yet to be fulfilled ~~for~~ ^{for} man.

And so unlike our secular preparations which have begun and will likewise soon end, God's preparations in Christ HAVE BEGUN in us and for us -- yet they will not reach completion at any calendar date. Nevertheless, God uses our liturgical calendar -- he uses this Advent to again inspire his preparations IN US and FOR US to new heights.

And so Paul says in grateful confidence: "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Paul ~~emphasizes~~ ^{emphasizes} here that God has begun a good work in us, AND IT IS ONLY BEGUN! That good work ^{that} God has begun in us IS THE PREPARATION FOR THINGS TO COME - ~~and that's good news.~~ ^{and that's good news.}

That good work from God is not like some preparations, which when done, are completed. For instance, a carpenter builds a house, an engineer builds a bridge, a friend buys and gives a gift. When any of these is finished, the work is done.

Other things, once begun, are never done. We plant a garden, but as any gardener knows,

the work has only begun. We have a baby, but any parent knows the real work has only begun. We offer our marriage vows, but the real marriage has only begun and is still developing when death parts us. We enter the church and pledge ourselves to be members of the body of Christ, only to find that the real job has only begun.

God's preparations IN US and FOR US are of this second type. Once we have received his ^{gift} of love, he has only begun to prepare us for our continued NEED FOR and OUTPOURING OF his presence. Once begun, he continues to prepare us for new revelations and new appreciations of the way he deals with us.

Advent is significant and necessary, because it is that time when God reminds us ANEW of his immense preparation for the good work he has begun in us. He desires us to be IMMENSELY EXCITED AND PREPARED to share that good work he has begun -- namely, the joy, peace, and love of Christ.

The question of course is: How can I best prepare to share what God has already begun? And if you and I are serious about this question, then we must first refine ourselves. We must cast away those feelings and actions which negate ~~with~~ what God has begun -- for he has begun a good work in us.

In other words, God gives us time for repentance and confession. And we need this time. For in our individual and group lives we have often allowed BAD WORKS to crowd out and sometimes even negate the good work God has begun in us. Yes, to really be excited and prepared to share the good work that God has begun, I must first get rid of the bad work that I have begun. For only in preparing this way can there be joy, and peace, and love Dec. 25th or any other day.

Isn't it strange how we Christians so often relegate repentance and confession to the back seat, and at the same time put it in the front seat in a secular way. I am speaking of the fact that so many people today are quite unwilling to confess to God, family or neighbor what they are REGULARLY willing to confess to a psychoanalyst. And so at a time when our faith's principles of repentance and confession are taken lightly, the weekly ritual ~~practice~~ of completely uncovering our innermost thoughts and our secret desires to a psychoanalyst have become a way of life.

My point here is not to debate where repentance and confession should take place. Rather, I only seek to illustrate that ^{even the angels would also} the phenomenon of repentance and confession are basic -- necessary preparations for new life -- ~~necessary if we desire a completion to what has been begun.~~

Paul declares that God has begun a good work in us and it will not be brought to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. That means that God has given us time to repent and confess -- to him and to each other -- to unload all the bad work -- to do all this so that we will be better prepared to REALLY share the exciting joy and love of his son.

But there are other reasons why I must again hear that God's good work has only begun. For as I hear these words from Paul, I am freed from the notion that God expects me to be perfect RIGHT HERE AND NOW. What a tremendous burden is lifted when God assures me that he has only begun his good work in me -- that I don't have to reach perfection today.

And yet, because he has begun that good work in me already, I have the power to press on -- I need not give up -- I need not feel defeated even if I don't complete his work today, for the preparations have only begun.

And so with this word of Paul, I know that

God does not ~~expect~~ ^{demand} perfection right now -- and with that assurance, there is no reason to give up -- ~~completion.~~ ^{No reason to quit striving toward completion.}

cut This moment is much like that morning for the little 5 yr. old boy after the huge spring snowfall. The boy took a big shovel out and began to work on the front sidewalk. A man came by and said: "What are you doing, son?" The lad replied, "I'm shoveling a path for my dad." The man looked at the smallness of the boy and the bigness of the shovel and said, "And how do you expect to do it?" The little guy straightened up and looked the man in the face and boldly declared, "BY JUST KEEPING AT IT."

Because God has begun the good work of Christ in us -- his gracious love enables us to keep at it.

An old prospector in the hills of Arizona worked a mine for many years. At the end of his endurance, he laid down his worn pick and for a mere pittance sold his claim to a passer-by. The new owner began to dig and just three feet further he struck a vein of glittering ore. The old miner gained a tremendous insight from that incident and began to tell the story to young men. He would always end the story with the words, "Son, never quit dreaming until you have dug just three feet farther."

good
script On this day God reminds each of us that he has just begun a good work in us. We must never quit dreaming of the fulfillment of his love, even if we don't experience it right now. He has just begun a good work in us - we are called to continue to dream and reach for its fulfillment -- for it may only be a few steps away.

In a couple of recent home study groups, a ~~similar~~ ^{common} question was raised: it went something

like this: Isn't there ^{ever} a time when ~~you can no~~ ^{it is impossible to} ~~love and forgive?~~ As ~~human~~ ^{beings} with weaknesses and limitations, we're all tempted to answer "yes" to that question. And we do answer "yes" sometimes in our actions.

But God again reminds us today that he has begun his good work in us. And with that gift of his ^{always} gracious presence, we have the strength to ^{always} share his good work -- NOT BECAUSE IT'S EASY, BUT BECAUSE HE HAS PREPARED US TO SHARE IT.

By doing so, God promises no instant remedy -- no instant completion. But it will be the beginning of the remedy. Because what God has begun will grow as it is put to use.

Knowing that God has begun his good work in us can make us a repentant yet determined people this Advent. We can repent for our injustices to others -- for abusing and wasting our resources -- for our unwillingness to depise corruption in ourselves and others -- for our rationalizing instead of forgiving. Yes, and with his good work begun in us, WE CAN be determined to share his righteousness with all races; WE CAN be more determined to be honest; WE CAN be more determined to conserve the gifts of energy -- AND YES WE CAN be more determined to forgive so that even psychoanalysts will be able to have a little time off.

And so in this Advent, with Paul, in response to the good work God has begun in all of us -- "it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Amen.

ADVENT II
Church of the Master - Troy
December 8, 1974

"CLEAR THE WAY"

"Turn away from your sins," (John said),
because the Kingdom of heaven is near! John
was the one that the prophet Isaiah was
talking about when he said:

"Someone is shouting in the desert,
'Get the Lord's road ready for him;
make a straight path for him to travel!'"

Math. 3:2-3

John the Baptist sounds the Advent Alarm:
REPENT! Or as translated here: Turn away
from your sins, for God is about to enter
human history.

Obviously, ^{*implied*} ~~assumed~~ in this assertion is
man's sinfulness. John was calling for
people to CLEAR THE ROADWAY TO THE KINGDOM
from sin -- to clear life's relationships
of those attitudes, actions, and mentalities
which militate against God's will of love.

John's claim - and rightfully so - was
that NO ONE can truly experience the
fruits of God's kingdom if he is enslaved
to greed, dishonesty, and any other UN-Godly
attitudes or actions.

His message has the same piercing effect
for us. The celebration of the INCARNATION -
the coming of Jesus now or at any future
time - will have no redeeming value IF
WE HAVE DETOURED FROM HIS LOVE AND HIS
ROUTE OF DISCIPLESHIP. — *our relationships.*

I'd simply like to reflect upon two facets
of our lifestyle which find John's call for
repentance APPLICABLE to our age.

First, as Christians, we must turn away from our natural tendency to be seduced by life's sideshows.

Too often, we live our lives like the young teen-age girl who went to the circus for the first time. Went - one small tent to another. INtrigued - amazed - soon out of cash - went home thrilled .

Next day - read paper - then realized she had only seen the sideshows. Missed main event. Had only seen the obvious as she entered the grounds.

Yes, we all know the ~~temptation~~ ease of falling into this sinful trap. Even some of our church activities are pure sideshows. *suffer from this sin of superficiality*

(The case of A. Dobbert - total fixation with altar setting. Kingdom of God's love is depreciated into "having the altar cloth hanging properly.")

Even LITURGY can become a sideshow - and thereby a source of sin. The liturgy only a tool to help us experience and share God's love - once it becomes an end in itself, we've ~~been~~ lost sight of the main event.

Similarly - Christmas giving can become a sideshow. To buy to boost the economy might be a worthy purpose, but it is not the purpose of our Christmas gift giving. We give in order to express God's kingdom within us. - That is God's love. That is the Advent-Christmas spirit. Any other motivation is the manipulative powers & principalities of this world seducing us into a sideshow rather than the main event.

Coupled with this is
the sideshow of "right" appearances - how often this becomes the spirit of our Advent preparations -- buying the right

tinsel, the right party dress, the right booze, the right this or that. Obviously we like to appear as if we care. But thank God for John the Baptist -- camel's hair, wild locusts and honey. God uses what we might consider a sideshow freak to announce the main event. Might this just help us a bit to turn away from our lust for proper appearances JUST LONG ENOUGH to recognize that the kingdom is found in the depth of love -- not in the sugar coating we try to pass off as Christmas cheer.

Yes, how easy it is to get distracted by the sideshows and miss the main event. John announces Good News when he calls for repentance - clear the way of the distraction so that you can experience the real joy and significance of the kingdom.

Secondly, John's call for repentance drives us to let God free us from the clutter that we've scattered in the roadway to his kingdom. John proclaims that in turning away from sin we need no longer be bound up in guilt.

And that's our really scandalous sin -- not trusting God's forgiveness. Hanging onto the guilt even after repenting - punishing ourselves even after God frees us

Confronted my first abortion case since moving to Troy. How can the Incarnation -- the celebration of God's love in the flesh how can there be joy and peace in that event if we cling to our guilt even after repentance?

John assures us: Repent, and you are assured of forgiveness. That's living in the kingdom. That's experiencing the main

event AND NEVER again being satisfied with the sideshows.

That's being given the Good News, and then being unable to keep it to yourself. That's clearing the way for others so they too may experience the kingdom.

And that's working to heal the sick, and offering gifts to the poor to release them from their bondage of oppression. Experiencing this main event is such good news that it cannot be suppressed or silenced. KX

?Repentance means human redemption is coming. It is near. It is here. That is the message of Advent. John is God's messenger. Jesus is our Redeemer. And we are his disciples.

So let's get on with repenting - clearing the way of distractions and guilt hangups - so that the kingdom of heaven will be near and experienced here.

Amen

ADVENT III

Luth Church of the Master, Troy
Dec. 4, 1976

"PREPARE THE WAY"

(the prophecy of Isaiah) A voice crying aloud in the wilderness, "Prepare a way for the Lord; clear a straight path for him." Luke 3:4

I have never gone on a guided tour, but I'm told that guides usually prepare the tourists for what they will soon see. They tell you in advance what will soon meet the eye -- not to detract from the magnificence or wonder of the tour -- but so that you can better take it in-- to get all from the experience that you possibly can.

And that's exactly what Advent does. We have come to the manger before. We know from past experience that the dirt of the stable is holy ground. But Advent again helps us prepare. Prepare, says the Baptizer. Get yourselves ready. That's the Word in Advent.

But unlike the travel guide, John the Baptist does not prepare us for what "we're going to see." He does not outline the meek figure of the teen-age Virgin Mary -- nor speak of the heavenly messengers hovering over the stable. Instead, he has another message of preparation.

His are harsh words -- words that almost grate in our ears and disturb the pastoral manger scene. This desert man says, Repent - Make the Messiah's pathway a cleared one -- free from the litter and clutter that has gotten in Christ's way.

Yes - that's the preparation of Advent. There is no way we can possibly celebrate CHRIST'S MASS if our relationship between Him and each other is cluttered with sin, resentments, lies, and other alienations.

Before we can proclaim the good news of the Christmas story -- we must consider our readiness to receive that news. If we are filled with

guilt, hatred, resentment, or a totally "things" approach to Christmas -- then we've blocked up the passageway for God's glory and praise.

And the fact of the matter is -- all of us have cluttered up the way. And so you ask -- how do we prepare the way? Quite simply, we clear up the clutter. That's the highest priority of Advent. Get the junk out of the passageway to Christ.

How have you and I junked up the route??

Needless to further say, it's going to take a few weeks (at least) to clear the clutter. ~~And~~ while we're doing that there's one more thing involved in our Advent preparations -- that's taking a look at our Christmas lists, and checking them twice -- yes, checking them twice to see where Jesus stands on them. In fact -- to check and see if Jesus even made the list.

For instance, how many women of the Master (or men for that matter) have put Jesus on their lists for Monday Dec. 20th at 1 p.m. That's the day Church of the Master visits Luther Haven. Yes -- this is something that shows if Jesus is really on our Christmas list.

Visiting with relatives at Christmas is

obviously important -- but that's a given reality either at Christmas or some other time of the year. It's when we start extending our family circle that Jesus' name becomes apparent on our Christmas lists.

And so, likewise, how many of us have already set aside our Christmas gift for Jesus. I'm not talking about a toekn buck or two that we take out of our purses on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day -- I'm talking about a planned gift for the Christ child. Just the way that we've planned all the other gifts that we've bought for the family.

It's amazing how we can spend a \$100, or \$200 some even \$300 or more for Christmas gifts -- then give Christ 5 bucks -- and some people not even that -- and then think that we've prepared the way for Jesus Christ.

Yes - Jesus' gift from the Master this year will hopefully fulfill a vital ministry at Lutheran Social Services. And if we're really preparing his way -- then we're already planning his gift. Then we've already put him on our Christmas lists.

Because he has put each of us on his list. In fact, he never takes us off his list. Day in, day out, 365 days a year -- we are given top priority on Jesus' list.

And just so that we don't forget how important we are -- how much he treasures us and our ministry in his Name -- he regularly offers us a sign of his love -- we call it Holy Communion -- ~~the~~ the Lord's Supper -- the Eucharist.

It's Jesus' time to remind us that we are on his list -- that he is in us, and we are in him -- that he will forever forgive us when we clear up the clutter between him - between one another.

Come -- let us receive waht he has prepared for us -- then let us go and continue preparing the way for him.

AMEN

ADVENT II
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
Dec. 10, 1978

"WHAT ARE YOU PREPARING FOR?"

"Look eagerly (while you wait) for the coming
Day of the God - and work to hasten it on."

2 Peter 3:12

Only 15 more days 'til Christmas. There is still time to address cards, and mail packages, and decorate the house. Even some time to get that doll with the brown hair and pink jacket who walks and talks and rides a motorcycle like the one your daughter saw on TV.

This is what we're all preparing for, isn't it? The cards, and packages, and parities, and decorations, and dolls - and all those goodies under the tree. Yes - this is what most of us are preparing for ... because that's what the radio and TV have been telling us to prepare for.

But have you noticed how it seems to come a little earlier each year? Only tens years ago the merchants at least waited 'til after Thanksgiving before launching the Christmas blitz. But this year the offensive was set up before Halloween. No sooner had the Haunted House been struck at Oakland Mall - and presto, the next day that house turned into Santa's Shop.

~~Is it any wonder that Christians don't want to sing Advent songs during Advent?!? The pulse of our~~
today is hurry up - don't waste time with
Advent preparations - let's get right into all those
good old Christmas hymns that everybody knows
and likes.

~~Yes -~~ As we look at the Christian church today,
we must ask ourselves: WHAT ARE WE PREPARING FOR?
Do we look any different in our preparations
from non-believers? Or maybe that's the wrong
question? Maybe we're not supposed to look any
different from the rest of our culture?

All this talk about "preparing the way" is just religious poetry -- meant for those pagans in the wilderness during the days of John the Baptist. Those were wilderness slogans - not fitting for a sophisticated generation like our own!

Well - some commentatiorers today do not agree. In fact, one commentator says that in this pre-Christmas season THE WORLD IS A WILDERNESS. He calls it a wilderness of sin, because nearly \$600 million dollars in goods will be stolen during these days of preparation - more than a billion dollars in alcohol will be consumed to make Christmas peaceful and joyful. He concludes that that this pre-Christmas world is a wilderness of insincerity and unreality!

Possibly, this commentator is exaggerating a bit! But he does cause me to wonder: WHAT AM I PREPARING FOR? What is the unique purpose of my Christmas preparations as a Christian? Likewise, what are you preparing for AS FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS OF JESUS?

Saint Peter sums it up in the earlier quote: Pre-Christmas is a time TO LOOK EAGERLY WHILE WE WAIT FOR THE COMING OF THE DAY OF GOD --- and it's a time TO WORK TO HASTEN THAT COMING! In summary - Peter says this is a time FOR WATCHFULLY WAITING and WILEFULLY WORKING to bring the presence of Christ down to earth.

Peter's ideas sure aren't as spectacular as some of the pre-Christmas specials. He goes completely against the grain of all the rest of the advertising at this time. Instead of telling us to get out there and hustle after more presents - he tells us to "cool it" - to spend these days by patiently watching.

Have you ever heard a more dull recipe for Christmas?!? In fact - Peter couldn't suggest a more distasteful thing for us to do THAN TO PATIENTLY WAIT. We live in a no-wait age.

Instant Oatmeal; Minute Rice; one-hour dry cleaning, quickie divorces, drive-thru restaurants, Microwave cooking, supersonic travel. We'll even risk our lives driving through a changing spotlight rather than waiting the 30 seconds for the light to turn green. What poor advice for pre-Christmas shopping: TO PATIENTLY WATCH AND WAIT!

And yet - how many of us have been happy with all the rushing around so far of this pre-Christmas! For most of us - by the time Christmas gets here, we'll be like the clerk who said to another shopper: "I'm so tired I can hrdly stand, and I've still got to endure Christmas day with my in-laws. Yuck! Christmas, who needs it anyway!"

Regretably - that's the way a lot of us feel by the time Christmas has arrived. So maybe Peter does offer great wisdom for our preparations when he says: WATCHFULLY AND EAGERLY WAIT!

I think the best ~~current~~ illustration OF THE IMPORTANCE OF WAITING in any preparation for Christ is seen in the Guyanna massacre. By now, we've all read and heard much about the people who were followers of Jim Jones. They were not deeply troubled people - in fact, many of them were very intelligent and religious - as well as very idealistic.

But most analysts indicate that they had one common TRAGIC FLAW! They were very impatient with the world the way it was -- in the sense that they could not wait for God to make things right. They surely could not wait for Jesus; second coming. They wanted things RIGHT - NOW! They wanted a leader who would promise a paradise in their lifetime. And along came Jim Jones TO SATISFY THEIR INSECURITY and need for instant gratification. And now we know the tragic results for those who WILL NOT WAIT FOR GOD -- but would rather follow a charismatic superman.

Yes - a word of God that we badly need these Advent days AND ALL OUR DAYS ~~from God~~ is the word: WAIT. Whether we're grade school children, teenagers or mature adults - all of us could benefit these days thru a spirit of waiting.

First and foremost - waiting for Christ to come. There are far too many Christians today getting caught up in all kinds of fanatic cults and movements because they want INSTANT GRATIFICATION IN RELIGION. They aren't satisfied with God's promises: they don't want to wait for Christ's Second Coming; instead, they want to be little messiahs themselves, so they can romp around and tell all their neighbors how super religious they have become.

But not only do we need to be willing to wait in faith -- we could all benefit just in daily living IF WE LEARNED TO WAIT and taught our children TO WAIT. Waiting leads to appreciation. We wonder why children often fail to show appreciation today: one good reason is that they never have to wait for anything. They get everything they want - from their own bedroom to the college of their choice.

But Peter is not ~~only~~ saying that PREPARATION for Christ means that we are to PASSIVELY WAIT -- he says while we're waiting for the Second Coming, we should be WILLFULLY WORKING TO HASTEN IT ON!

Stated most simply, that means during our waiting we are to be WATCHING for every opportunity we have to offer the spirit of Christ to someone else. That's the kind of WORK that will hasten Christ on.

Obviously, part of that work is gift-giving! Our Christian faith upholds the practice of gift-giving at Christmas -- it is one way that we can show the spirit of Christ. But when that gift-giving becomes a hustle or an end-in-itself-- when the motive of love and compassion is lost

from the giving, the giver, and the receiver -- then Christmas has just degenerated into what it originally was -- a pagan holiday for extravagant one-upsmanship!

Not so with us! We are preparing NOW and ALWAYS to bring the presence of Christ into our pre-Christmas celebrations. Above all else, that is WHAT WE ARE PREPARING FOR! To lose sight of that during these days is to lose sight of the most significant joy of Christmas --

namely, the patient waiting and working to make the spirit of Christ the greatest gift to give and receive at Christmas.

AMEN

ADVENT II

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

December 9, 1984

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WHERE THERE'S HOPE, THERE'S LIFE"

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40:1-2) "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way -- 'a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (Mark 1:2-3)

Newspaper headlines recently reflected that students at Brown University had voted that their school stock cyanide capsules so that they could take them in the event "of a nuclear war." When we lose faith in both man and God, then life becomes hopelessly scary. Increases in terrorism and acts of destruction these days are truly symptomatic of a world in scarce supply of one of its most vital human needs: HOPE. The late Emil Brunner once said: "What oxygen is for the lungs, hope is for the meaning of human life.

Karl Menninger tells about a group of doctors who survived the horrors of slave labor in a World War II concentration camp. Each night they secretly came together and shared their knowledge in a small medical society. They believed that someday what they were learning and sharing would be of benefit to the whole world. "Kept alive by HOPE" was the reason given for their survival. They had a reason ... a purpose for going on ... a hope for living.

A few years ago the psychology department of Duke University carried on an interesting experiment. They wanted to see how long rats could swim. In one container they placed a rat for whom there was no possible escape. He swam for a few moments and then ducked his head to drown. In the other container they made the hope of escape possible for the rat. The rat swam for several hours before finally drowning. The conclusion of the experiment was just the opposite of our common conclusion: We usually say, "As long as there is life, there is hope." The Duke experiment proved, "As long as there is hope, there is life."

That's the essence of our Christian life and faith

as well: "WHERE THERE'S HOPE, THERE'S LIFE." Where there's hope, there's meaning, and purpose, and reason to keep on going. Where there's hope, things will get better.

This is a very basic foundation of my pastoral counseling and relationships. As I relate to people -- whether its through marriage counseling, or hospital visitation, or struggling with drug abuse, or sharing moments of bereavement, or just listening to family problems -- regardless of the special circumstances, I always find myself somehow focusing upon one question: "DO YOU HOPE THAT THINGS WILL GET BETTER?" Regardless of the problem, if persons have a HOPE THAT THINGS WILL GET BETTER, then there is life, then there is a future, then there may be a continuing relationship.

But when we no longer have a hope for a better tomorrow, then there's no way for it to happen. When we no longer hope for forgiveness, then there can't be a more harmonious tomorrow. When we no longer anticipate renewal, whether its physical, emotional, or spiritual -- then the future looks very hopeless.

The essence of Advent is a HOPE FOR TOMORROW. That's what Christmas is all about! In Christ, God gave hope to the world. That's our singular mission as Christians -- to continue to tell others that Christmas is coming. We, like John the Baptist, are called to prepare the way. Not only on December 9th, but every single day of the year. Don't we all feel a little more hopeful at this time? Isn't Christmas-time filled with greater hope, and peace, and joy?? Isn't it sad we only prepare for Christ's coming just one month each year??

Advent is that time which reminds us that every day, every week, every month must be a time for preparing for Christ's coming. Advent reminds us we must prepare 12 months a year ...if we want to live with hope every day. We must give of ourselves in January through November the way we give of ourselves in December. That's the way to keep the Christmas hope alive.

But you and I say -- Golly, I'm only one small person. How can I make a difference? How can my preparations bring hope to the world? What difference will I make? What impact can I possibly have?

A few years ago there was a terrible earthquake in Alaska. Anchorage was devastated. A number of people wrote to the governor demanding that he do certain things for them. They outlined the suffering that they had endured and demanded that the state take responsibility.

Later the governor appeared on television and reported that, among all the demands, he had received a letter from a boy who had written on a 3x5 card and taped to it two nickels. The boy had written these words: "Use this wherever it is needed. If you need more, let me know."

Two nickels taped to a 3x5 card isn't much. But it's not the amount ... it's the spirit of hope with which it was given that really made the difference. The spirit of that child's love shared by that governor helped to multiply those two nickels thousands of times over.

That's the way God's hope and love work in this world. God often uses insignificant little things to accomplish incredible miracles of hope. He began with a manger and a stable. Not very much in the world's eyes, but that manger and stable have inspired one of the greatest peace and hope movements in this world. That's how God accomplishes his will of hope -- often through little things. He uses a few splashes of water ... he uses a piece of bread and a sip of wine ... SIMPLE LITTLE THINGS, WHICH ACCOMPLISH ETERNAL LIFE, FORGIVENESS, RECONCILIATION. Simple things that give incredible renewal to us personally and to our whole world.

But you and I continue our protest, don't we? We say: but there's so much brokenness in the world ... there's so much sin, so much alienation ... so much hatred and evil. How can we, the church, have an impact upon all these things? The answer is obvious: WE CAN'T ... AT LEAST, NOT ALL AT ONCE. Renewal, reformation, reconciliation, hope for the world -- these all are ongoing processes. As our text says today ... "with the Lord a thousand years are like a day." God's hope for the world is not accomplished instantly. God's renewal is much like the story of the Duke of Norfolk.

This Duke once sent the King of England a priceless treasure -- it was the Portland Vase, a rare antique. The King wanted this great expression of love to be shared by the whole nation -- so he had it placed in the British Museum. But the King's chief servant was extremely proud and jealous -- especially because of this warm expression from the Duke. He began to plot the overthrow of the Duke, and in the process he was dismissed from service.

Eaten up with hatred, he vowed to get even with the Duke. His scheme centered upon the Portland Vase. He went to the British Museum. Eventually, visitors left the area around the Portland Vase. Quickly and quietly, he climbed the barrier and made one final check of the area. Nobody was in sight. He grasped the beautiful masterpiece and with all his might sent it crashing into pieces.

The crash echoed through the Museum. Instantly the attendants were there. But too late. The priceless Portland Vase was in hundreds of pieces. They swept it up feeling it was beyond repair. But the King said: "Save every piece. We'll search for someone to repair it no matter how much it costs." After a long search, finally a craftsman was found in Scotland. He was a distant relative of the original creator of the Vase.

He came to London and labored for months. Working with endless skill and patience, he glued every broken fragment into its original place. I'm told today that you may still see this same Portland Vase in the British Museum --very faintly marked by restoration.

But more importantly, the story serves as a parable for each of us. We too have been fragmented and broken from the design of our originator. We have often allowed sin and evil to smash us to smithereens. We have fallen far short of the beauty and design that God intended for us. From all that's observable, we would appear to be hopelessly destined for the trash can.

Yes, God could have thrown away all the pieces of our broken humanity and started all over again. But he didn't. His love for us was far too great. His priceless treasure must be redeemed.

So God searched the universe for someone who would come to earth and put us back together again. But he searched in vain. No one could be found. So finally he chose His only Son, Jesus Christ. Only through this human being could the Father's heart be satisfied. Only this human being could express the divine love and go to the uttermost lengths to remake God's creation. Only this human being could bring God's true HOPE INTO THE WORLD.

Down the hot, dusty streets of Jerusalem, this Son of God searched out the broken pieces. On the shores of Galilee, by a well in Samaria, in villages and at market places, in a sycamore tree in Jericho -- always He searched and claimed the broken pieces. But after all, that was his whole purpose on earth -- to give a broken humanity renewed HOPE.

When God found me, he found another broken piece of humanity. And much like the thousands who encountered John the Baptist -- God picked me up, he drenched my head with water, he forgave my sin, and he placed me back into his supportive community, the church. And he said, now shine and glow in that community ... live up to the potential I have given you ... be a servant of HOPE FOR THE WORLD. GIVE AND FORGIVE, AS I HAVE GIVEN UNTO YOU. For where there's hope, there's life ... there's relationships ... there's the love of Christ.

Through Jesus Christ, you and I have had our brokenness remolded. We have turned back to our Master Planner to be remade into the useful vessel that he intended us to be. God has taken us ... and continues to take us as we are ... broken, fragmented, sometimes filthy, ragged and rough -- takes us and patiently remakes us into his servants of love.

God comes into our lives through the life of Jesus Christ. We are called to PREPARE THE WAY FOR CHRIST'S COMING into all the other broken lives of humanity. We are called to offer that hope of Christ every single day. For there is no greater hope for the world than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

AMEN

ADVENT II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 7, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS"

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." Matthew 3:1-3

It is an evening in mid-December - it could even be this evening of December 7th ... or any other evening this coming week. Much as tonite might be, it is a bitter cold evening; the snow crunches and squeaks with every step. It has been snowing all day. But you decide to venture out anyway.

The car turns over very slowly; you creak your way over to pick up friends. Finally, as the windows have now defrosted and your toes are thawed, you arrive at your destination -- a large concert hall. How good it feels to enter the warmth of this brightly, lighted building.

There is a gleam and glow in the mumblings of the masses in the auditorium - anticipation and excitement fill the air. Soon, the houselights are dimmed; the stage curtain opens revealing an orchestra and large choir. The conductor enters followed by four soloists. The audience breaks into a welcome applause. The conductor bows and mounts the podium ... then raises his baton -- the audience is immediately hushed.

And then the familiar yet haunting overture begins. (Play) It continues for about 5 minutes. then, in great expectation and ringing clarity, the tenor steps forward and begins:

Comfort ye my people," saith your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned." In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the deserts a highway for our God."

Finally, the choir receives its cue - they stand and break forth with one grand, sweeping cascade of glory:

"The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it!"

The voices sound like the voices of heaven's angels. They announce the Good News. They proclaim the entrance of God

into history -- an entrance which has happened and will continue to happen. It is the proclamation of a prophet named John the Baptist.

His proclamation came nearly 2000 years ago. It was a harsh proclamation directed at a people who had become stiff-necked, stubborn, and self-righteous. His message was rough-hewn -- because there were crooked places in the world that needed to be made straight. And there were rough, unloving relationships that needed to be renewed and reborn again. It was a weary world ... a wilderness world ... a wilderness of hate and distrust ... a wilderness of war and godless militarism ... a wilderness of unrepentant and unfruitful followers whose faith had become a legalistic parade of self-virtue.

You have again heard that prophetic voice nineteen centuries later. And now you leave the concert hall. As you walk outside, you realize that what's outside tonight hasn't changed much over 1900 years. It's the same cold as it was 1900 years ago; the trees are just as barren as they were then; the night is just as dark as it has always been. There are still rumors of war in the air; nations are still set against nations; the swords and spears have not been made into plowshares and pruning hooks but rather into star wars and missile systems; and many of your friends are still stiff-necked, stubborn, and self-righteous. In short, the world is still a wilderness. But tonight (or this morning) you have heard A VOICE CRYING IN THAT WILDERNESS. You have heard the voice of God.

And that voice has not been saying (like so many other voices): "Are you ready for Christmas yet?" But rather that voice has been saying: "Never stop hoping; never stop loving, never stop learning of the things that make for peace." That's what the real prophetic voice of Christmas is all about. It is still the voice of God through John the Baptist: a voice saying: "Get ready ... but get ready to celebrate the most significant event of life -- that God came into the world as a person. Yes, get ready to celebrate the birth of the Messiah!!"

That's the voice crying in the wilderness. It seems to be totally out of touch with all the other voices in the wilderness. Those other voices are shouting and crying: "there's only 18 days left ... so get all you can get now before it's too late!" But there's no lasting hope in those voices ... there's no lasting love in all their shouting ... there's no lasting peace in their crying for a piece of the Christmas action. All that shouting is just a lot of wilderness talk -- it's a lot of chatter about a one-day commercial affair. But all that noise won't give us anything that's worth keeping.

There is only one Messiah in this world -- and John the Baptist prepared his way. And George Frederic Handel has carried on with his message ever since. If there is any hope in the world, and there is, it is because his baptismal promises continue to be received. If there is any peace in the world, and there is, it is because his forgiving presence continues to be shared! If there is any love in the world, and there is, it is because his incarnation has touched you and me ... and we have become his body of love in this world. The hope, the peace, and the love of this world have been made possible by the friends of the Messiah, known as the body of Christ.

That's why even the prophecies of a hard-nose, non-conformist like John the Baptist can be called ... Good News! Because they remove us from the wilderness of this world -- a wilderness of superficial sharing ... a wilderness of warfare and weaponry ... a wilderness of isolation and alienation from God and our fellow humanity. Granted, we aren't removed forever. But even for a moment, even for the length of a concert, we know the hope, the peace and the love of God ... and that keeps us yearning for a lifetime for a more perfect ... a fuller experience of his kingdom.

Thanks be to God for A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS. We need this time ... even if it's only an hour ... to be removed from the wilderness of emptiness all around us. We need this time to be filled with the love and joy and peace of the Lord. Thank you for removing yourself from the wilderness of the world this morning ... thank you for taking the time TO RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD ... AND TO PREPARE HIS WAY IN YOUR LIFE. There is only one proper response to that kind of preparation ... and it goes something like this: (Hallelujah Chorus.)

AMEN.

ADVENT II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 5, 1993 (revised)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"FINDING YOUR WAY BACK HOME"

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God ... a voice cries out:" In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places smooth. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ... for the Word of God will stand forever. Is. 40:1,3-5,10

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens & a new earth, where righteousness is at home ...

2 Peter 3:13

There are stories; and there are stories; but one during my 51 years of life keeps coming back with the reality of today's texts. It was the summer of '62; I had just celebrated my 20th birthday. For two years, my pastor in Oshkosh had been preparing the way for Peter's future ministry. During that time, I had regularly read the lessons and assisted with Holy Communion. But, I had also been seriously dating a Methodist nurse for more than a year. And the first Sunday of the month was coming--another Sunday for reading the lessons and assisting with Holy Communion.

But I had other plans for that Sunday. I had planned a get-away with my girlfriend up to northern Wisconsin. For weeks - she and I and our friends had been planning this get-away. It was now Thursday evening before Sunday -- choir rehearsal night. In the middle of choir rehearsal, I went to my pastor's office. Upon seeing him I said, "Oh pastor, by the way I just want to remind you that I will not be here this weekend; Virginia and I are going up north for a get-away."

Without hesitation, he sternly said: "Well, Peter, you have to establish your own priorities in life. It's either a commitment to Christ ... or having fun with your friend. It appears that 'your friend' is more important!"

I was aghast! I couldn't believe he would lay that guilt trip on me. I looked at him and said, "Well, Pastor, if those are my choices, then I guess I'll take friendship with others rather than fellowship here! And while I'm talking I'm going to tell you, "No one has ever lorded it over me as you just did ... not even my parents would be that rigid. So, don't expect my return to this fold again."

I stormed out of the church -- trembling with anger and humiliation. When I arrived home, I announced to my parents that "I was finished with church - and they could also forget about their son becoming a pastor." ... "If he's an example of the way pastors are to care for future pastors & other people - then I want nothing to do with pastoral ministry." I went to my room and secluded myself for the evening!

I was fractured and deeply hurt. And yet, I was feeling pretty good: I felt I had really stood up to a bully! (Any of you ever want to do that with me?) But on the inside, I was ripped to shreds. I had hurt my parents; I had been disrespectful to my pastor ... and the whole choir had observed the worst of my foolish temper (of course, they had also seen my pastor's worst). Needless to say - if there was ever a time that I felt all alone ... that I felt I was hanging out on a limb all by myself, it was that time. And worst yet, I figured the limb was cracking ... soon it would break off, and I'd really be in a rut: severed from God, cut off from his church, and maybe even rejected by my parents.

Well, that weekend I went away on my northern Wisconsin get-away (o.k. time) And for the next two weeks, I didn't sing, I didn't worship, I didn't go near the church, and I totally avoided my pastor like the plague. Boy, was I showing them! Then about three weeks later, the phone rang. It was my pastor. He wanted to see me -- just for a maybe an hour or so. We met. We confessed. We cried. We hurt. We hugged. We laughed. And then we rejoiced -- because God had helped us FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME! God had prepared the highway of reconciliation. God had lifted up the valleys of anger, and made the mountains of human pride low; God had made the uneven ground of arrogance into a smooth plain.

Dear friends, it is always God's Spirit that leads us to FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME ... "HOME" here being that place where life is at peace and there's wholeness ... shalom ... where life is finally balanced ... where the ruptures of yesterday are miraculously sewn up & made smooth and no longer painful. If you hear nothing else, hear this today: GOD NEVER LEAVES ANY ONE OUT ON A LIMB! His will is always to help us FIND OUR WAY BACK TO HIS HOME ... TO HIS SANCTUARY ... TO THAT SAFE PLACE where life is whole, at peace, without terror, without fear, without abuse or greed or animosity or guilt.

How many of you have even been out on that limb? How many of you have ever allowed anger, arrogance and pride to drive a wedge between family or friends? How many of you have never allowed some stupid fantasy or fool-hardy game to jeopardize your faithfulness to God, to family, and to friends. We've all been out there "on a limb," haven't we? In our stubbornness, we've hung out there on that limb literally dying on the vine. And in our hearts, we know that God always wants us TO FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME. But will we choose it? Many times, Not! I'll go my way and you'll go your way -- but don't expect me to let go of my anger, my arrogance, my greed, my grief, my desire to stay apart. Yes, we can choose God's comfort, God's reconciliation, God's forgiving grace; but instead, we often choose OUR concrete conceit, OUR absolute arrogance, OUR stupid stubbornness.

But this is hardly a new story. We have learned our lesson plan well from our religious forefathers. For decades, Israel rejected the covenant relationship with God "out of willful disobedience to the Law." Against God's prophetic Word, Israel still went ahead with her Babylonian alliance.

And then in exasperation, Babylon came upon Jerusalem, razed it to the ground, and carried away her able-bodied men and women into exile. In Babylon, the Israelites again became strangers in a strange land. Is it any wonder that they cried out: "All is grass ... here today and gone tomorrow." Is it any wonder that they felt helpless and hopeless. With no temple of their own ... with no land of their own -- they had willfully crawled out on a limb ... and now they were being pushed further and further to the cracking point. It looked like Israel would break off again into the abyss of nothingness. Is it any wonder that the prophet Isaiah cried for "Comfort, comfort" for my people, Israel. And God heard their cries, and as always, helped her FIND HER WAY BACK HOME. Just as he had done in Egypt, now he was doing it again in Babylon. He had prepared the highway of renewal and reconciliation. ALL ISRAEL HAD TO DO WAS TURN AROUND AND WALK ON IT!

Tell me now if that isn't Good News! Tell me now that the Gospel was not alive and well in the Old Testament. Tell me now that God has not always OFFERED THE WAY BACK HOME FOR HIS faithful people. Tell me now that God is not faithful and cannot be trusted. That's why Isaiah goes on: your iniquity is pardoned. Your God has prepared the way ... he has given you a desert highway ... he has lifted up the valleys and made low the mountains ... he has made the rough places smooth. For God's Word has spoken ... and it will stand forever."

Do you really want to know what Advent is all about? It is that season when God prepares THE WAY for us TO FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME! How can any of us celebrate the birth of Christ on Christmas if we have not allowed God to prepare the way in Advent? If you and I are still holding onto grudges or animosity or hatred ... if we are still being abusive or exploitive or racist or mean-spirited ... then how can we possibly sing "Silent Night" or "Joy to the World?" To sing the great Christmas carols without first having a change of heart is a total mockery of Christmas! It's a total denial of the reason for the season!!

That's why we are always greeted by John the Baptist on the Second Sunday of Advent: to remind us that there are still things out of place in this world and in our lives. It's time to do more than shopping & baking & rushing-around & partying & decorating. Advent is a time to take an inventory of WHAT'S STILL NOT RIGHT? WHAT'S STILL OUT OF PLACE IN OUR LIVES? WHAT STILL NEEDS FIXING IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS? WHAT'S STILL OUT OF KILTER IN THIS WORLD? Advent is that time TO FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME.

Friday's Blade announced that we are now spending \$44 Billion a year on treating "depression." Be assured, I don't want to oversimplify the reality of depression--there are some very serious cases of chronic depression that need great attention from medical intervention. But at the same time,

there are thousands (maybe millions) of cases of depression that are simply in need of the power of Advent: thousands of people who are feeling estranged, alienated, hurting, all alone, rejected, isolated ... and the list of personal pains goes on. But instead of being mad and moody and morbid, if these people just sat down with the ones they feel angry or isolated from ... and said: "Honey, I really miss you; I really love you; I really need you; I really can't stand to feel so rejected and abandoned; I need you to care for me, not hurt me!!"

That's the message of Advent: PREPARATION TIME TO FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME! That's why John the Baptist greets us today and every Advent: to point us to the ONE whose power is greater than our own or any other power on earth -- it is the power of forgiveness and reconciliation of Jesus Christ ... it is that GREAT ONE whose goal is always to help us FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME!

Is there anyone here who could possibly say that he/she has no need of Christ's power before Christmas? Well, just in case anyone thinks that he/she has "got it all together" ... then look around you and you will find hundreds of families who are experiencing abusiveness, neglect, greed, intolerance, bigotry, violence, harrassment, molestation, crime, etc. Can you and I possibly celebrate Christmas without doing anything for THAT SOMEONE for whom things just won't be right on Christmas? That's why our Sunday School gives Christmas Baskets every year ... because our children know what it's like to have a very bountiful Christmas ... and certainly they don't want other children hungry, homeless and without gifts on Christmas. But we don't have to look at poverty or welfare cases to see pain and hurt and alientation. There's pain and alienation and deep hurt sitting and standing here today!

Are we still looking for the most important thing for our Christmas lists? There's nothing more important than to do what John the Baptist first did: POINT TO THE ONE WHO IS GREATER THAN ANY OF US -- take time to prepare his spirit now before he comes on Christmas Eve and finds that we are so darn mad that we can't celebrate his birth because we're all hung up on yesterday's harmful baggage. This Advent - let us prepare the way of our Lord: let us point to HIS WAY, HIS TRUTH, AND HIS LIFE ... SO THAT WE FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME BEFORE CHRISTMAS!

AMEN.

Advent II
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 7, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“PREPARING THE WAY”

The voice of One crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain & hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Luke 3:4b-6

Every year at this time - marketing mania is saturating us with their message: “Prepare the way for the Christmas tree ... Prepare the way for the Christmas pageant ... Prepare the way for Handel’s “Messiah” ... Prepare the way for the purchase of gifts ... Prepare the way for the Christmas cards ... Prepare the way for the parties & other obligations ... and above all, Prepare the way for Christmas Day.” Are you beginning to feel the intensity of all the pressure ... or am I the only one that has not yet started my Christmas shopping??

Never let it be said that Americans don’t “prepare the way” for Christmas!! And maybe all the commercialism surrounding Christmas isn’t all that terrible - it adds a lot of emphasis to this primary, Christian festival. Yes - we Americans live up to the motto: Be Prepared. We prepare to make sure that we don’t forget anyone. And we prepare to make sure that we won’t offend anyone. And we prepare by decorating our homes, our churches, our schools, our yards, our clubs ... we’d even decorate city hall if we could get away with it. Like no other season - this is one for which we prepare. In fact on Dec. 26th last year, I went to the store to get some milk. I ran into a friend ... and she was out getting “after-Christmas cookie sales & candy sales” -- she was buying cookies and candy to freeze for this Christmas. Talk about “preparing the way!!!”

So, when John the Baptist reminds us to “Prepare the Way,” -- most of us will respond, “Hey, John, don’t look at us -- we’ve been “preparing the way” for days!!” Most Americans feel no need to “repent” in this season because we really feel like we’re “doing a very good thing for others.” And the truth is -- like no other season of the year ... there will be more generosity during this season than any other time of the year! But does that mean that we still have a perfectly clear vision of the Lord?? Have we clearly seen His Way ... has God been able to clear His Way from all the other clutter & idols of our lives???

If we’re really honest -- we must admit that much of our Christmas preparing has little or nothing to do with *“the Way of the Lord.”* That was the exact situation facing John the Baptist in his own day. Let’s recall this man for a moment. He was the son of a temple priest, Zechariah; so he was born into a family of deep religious piety. His childhood was filled with the sights & sounds of the temple. He knew the Torah well; he had seen the animal sacrifices; he knew all the ceremonial traditions. He was well versed in religiosity.

But he also knew he was living amidst a stiff-necked people -- a people who was often exclusive and racist. They hated the Samaritans. They were haughty, greedy and corrupt. There was great distrust among the religious leaders. They were constantly jockeying for positions of privilege & status. They played the part of religion on the Sabbath -- but the rest of the week they cheated & condemned one another; and they constantly overlooked serious human need. Their religion was little more than sentimentalism and ceremony.

Is it any wonder that John rebelled against this religious Way of Life?? Is it any wonder that this man ran into the wilderness looking for a new experience with God?? We sometimes wonder why we don't have hundreds of young people crowding our churches today -- maybe they are all feeling like John the Baptist: "they don't want a religion of sentimental ceremony. They want a deep, challenging religious experience -- they want a real, authentic God!"

Yes - it is good to hear John the Baptist's voice in this Advent season ... because he cautions us against making Christmas or any other spiritual season into a superficial journey. We all need to be reminded that the "robotic friendliness" of Christmas salesmanship may be little more than greed covered with artificial sweetener. When we think that this season reflects the highest incidence of stealing and drunkenness -- we need to be a little more sober as we sing "peace on earth and good will to all people!"

But let's not look at the dismal side of today's text. Let me restate this message from Luke as if it were spoken today: "In the sixth year of the administration of President William Clinton when George Voinivich was governor of the state of Ohio, Carty Finkbeiner was mayor of Toledo, Ohio, Sandy Isenberg was a Lucas County commissioner ... during the time that George Anderson was ELCA Bishop and James Rave was bishop of NWO ... the word of the Lord came to people of Glenwood Lutheran Church. And the voice heard was preaching a baptism of repentance ... it was crying out and saying--that God is still preparing His Way -- a Way in which He is trying to make his path straight: if there is any mountain or hill in the way -- He will level it!! If any valleys are standing in the way -- He will fill them up!! He will straighten all the crooked places and smooth off the rough places!! Because this God wants all flesh to see Him as He truly is: a God of salvation ... a God of mercy, forgiveness & loving kindness--a desperate lover who is seeking to bring his beloved back home to him!!"

Do you get it??? John's message is not a battering or bashing of God's people! It is a God's voice **CRYING OUT FOR HIS BELOVED CHILDREN TO COME BACK HOME!!** "Preparing the Way for God" is simply turning around and letting God's mercy and forgiveness take root again! It's welcoming the One whom we have often overlooked in all our hustle and bustle to think that we control Christmas. God is the creator & designer of Christmas -- not some marketing expert on 5th Avenue. And this time ... and every moment of the year he is crying out and leveling mountains and smoothing rough places and crossing rivers to get his message straight ... **TO PREPARE OUR HEARTS & MINDS TO SHARE HIS SPIRIT AND TRUTH.**

Maybe the only way we "can get it" is through a modern day prophet ... one who sang it exactly like John the Baptist! Diana Ross did it a few decades ago under the title "Aint No Mountain High Enough!" She was simply speaking of the love at Christmas that came into the world in the flesh. That kind of love is what God is still preparing for us every day: that love comes from his preparations--not from mine--not from your Search Committee's --not from all our Christmas preparations or shopping.

God has prepared this message for you & me ... and he's saying every day: *Don't ever get down or be discouraged when things get mucked up in this world. That's simply what happens in this world! You've lost a couple of candidates in your search ... I am still preparing the way for my new messenger at Glenwood. You're going to lose Peter's pastoral services during the weekdays ... but I am already preparing another messenger to make those visits. I haven't given up on you ... and you must not give up on me!! For I am "preparing the Way" right now ... so just listen again as Diana Ross tells it just like John the Baptist, this is what God is doing right now ...*

AMEN.