

Rev. Lynne Ogren
December 6, 2020

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B

Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. Amen

Show of hands...Who has finished setting out your Christmas decorations at home?
Decorated the tree? Your nativity scenes and garlands and outdoor lights?

I have heard more than once in the last couple of weeks how important these decorations are for some people this year. I have friends who are not usually in a rush to put up the tree and they had everything decorated the day after Thanksgiving. It seems people are in need of something to draw their attention away from the struggles around us.

One of my favorite Advent hymns speaks to our preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas.

*People, look east. The time is near of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table.
People, look east, and sing today—Love, the Guest, is on the way.*

I love to decorate my home this time of year, too. It's a bit like preparing for other guests. We make sure the house is clean. We buy extra groceries to fix something special that we wouldn't normally eat. We might get a flower arrangement for the dinner table.

We want to welcome our guests warmly, letting them know we are glad they have come, and to make their visit special.

Then, how do we prepare for a guest who comes not just to visit but to stay?

This is what Advent is about—preparing for the arrival of our most special Guest, Jesus Christ. But like Dr. Seuss' Grinch learned after he stole all the gifts and decorations from the "Whos down in Whoville", Christmas "came without ribbons, it came without tags. It came without packages, boxes, or bags."

Today our readings call us to prepare, not just our homes for a holiday, but our hearts for the One who is so much more than a visitor. Jesus came into the world to live with us.

Both Isaiah and Mark call us to prepare his way, to make his path straight. And John the baptizer says we do that through the act of repentance, which sounds more like Lent than Advent.

These weeks before Christmas are rather like the season of Lent before Easter. Even as we prepare our homes to celebrate the birth of Christ, we are also meant to prepare our hearts, clearing away the clutter, making straight the path to receive the gifts of God's grace and care brought to us by the Son of God.

When my decorations for Christmas come out, other things need to be put away. There simply isn't room for nativity scenes and the other collectables that are on display the rest of the year.

This year, our lives are different. There are no Christmas concerts and programs to attend. There will be fewer holiday parties and dinners. We might not feel the need to bake all those cookies and goodies if we aren't getting together with extended family.

As disappointing as some of this sounds, maybe we can see within our current situation a blessing. Maybe this year we have room on our calendars to pay more attention to preparing a way for the Lord in our hearts as much as in our homes.

In the green hymnals that used to be in our pews, "Joy to the World" was the first hymn in the Christmas section. In the newer red hymnal, it is the last hymn in the Advent section, calling us to "let every heart prepare him room."

Sadly, we are not singing our beloved hymns and carols together this year. But this Advent we could take time to read the words and hear their messages for us. There are several green hymnals out in the narthex today and you are welcome to take one home with you if you would like to use the words of the hymns as a devotional.

We might reclaim the idea of Sabbath this season, and take occasional breaks from things that distract our attention—TV, video games, shopping—and make space for prayer, scripture reading, or listening to good Christmas music.

We might eat more meals at the dinner table, or make more phone calls, and talk with those we love about meaningful things like what has become important or surprising or helpful this past year.

And as we listen with care, we can notice how God has been at work to lower some mountains and lift up some valleys and make our rough places plain.

John's call to repentance is not just about confessing what we think we have done wrong. Repentance is clearing away the clutter of those things that we think will save us—like our work, our place in the world, or the number of Christmas gifts we give or receive.

John tells us that Jesus will come to baptize with the Holy Spirit, the very breath of God, preparing us to be God's holy people. We are holy—loved and blessed—because God makes us so. Repentance turns our hearts toward the gift of that truth.

So, "make your house fair, as you are able," trim your hearth and set your table, but even more so "let every heart prepare him room." For it is our guest, Jesus Christ our Lord, who "comes to make his blessings flow" bringing gifts for the people of God to share with the world:

the gift of God's word of grace and forgiveness to comfort us,
the gift of freedom to live and serve one another with joy, and
the gift of the Holy Spirit who surrounds and fills us with the power of God's love,
which is the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and in our homes for a world in need of the good news Jesus brings.

Thanks be to God. Amen

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

- P God of power and might, tear open the heavens and come quickly to this weary world. Hear our prayers for everyone in need.
- L We pray for our leaders who light the way of Christ for your church. Strengthen the witness of bishops, pastors, deacons, musicians, teachers, and council members. Embed your word in their hearts.
As your body we pray.
- C Wait with us. Watch with us. Hear our prayers.**
- L We pray for all people who care for others in our community and around the world. Give elected leaders, medical personnel, social workers, teachers, and caregivers the compassion and courage to serve as you have empowered them.
As your body we pray.
- C Wait with us. Watch with us. Hear our prayers.**
- L We pray for the people in our families and congregation who are not joyful in this holiday season. Inspire us to comfort those who grieve, to be a companion to all who are lonely or depressed, and tend those who are sick or struggling, especially those listed in our bulletin and those we name now in our hearts. *(wait)*

Gather all people in your healing embrace.
As your body we pray.
- C Wait with us. Watch with us. Hear our prayers.**
- P Eternal God, we give you thanks for the saints who have prepared your way in the wilderness and taught us to continue their faithful work, especially our brother Russell Hodge. Make their generous lives an example for all.
As your body we pray.
- C Wait with us. Watch with us. Hear our prayers.**
- P Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
- C Amen.**