

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

December 6, 2020 – ADVENT 2B

Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

“*Are We Looking for Him?*”

Isaiah 40:1-11 ( Prepare the way of the Lord. )

Mark 1:1-8 ( John the Baptist prophesies about Jesus' coming.)

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In his book, *Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace: Living in the Spirit of the Prayer of St. Francis*, Kent Nerburn writes about his “Santa ministry.” Every holiday season he dons the red suit and flowing white beard and goes out into the streets to bring the presence of Old St. Nick to whomever he meets.

[Kent writes] “I never know what’s going to happen. I’ve found myself in nursing homes where men and women lifted themselves from their wheelchairs to sit on my lap. Fights in bars have stopped simply because I walked through the door. I have had handicapped people burst into song when they saw me pass. I’ve had a mother stop me on the street and lead me to her home so I could sit and hear the Christmas wishes of her sick child. . . . When I am Santa there are no barriers of race or age or wealth or faith.

One Christmas, “Santa” Kent was going to a community center in a violent part of town, near a housing project that was notorious for gangs and drugs. Getting out of his car, he began walking to his destination when he was followed by a group of teenage boys who started taunting him. This wasn’t mere joking—it was blood sport. Something *bad* was going to happen.

Then a car pulled up. Six young men in their 20’s got out and headed toward him. Santa thought he had seen his last Christmas. But then, six older men walked straight past Santa to the teenagers. The biggest and toughest of the men grabbed one of the teenagers by the scruff of the neck: “Hey man, you don’t mess with Santa.” The he turned to the trembling St. Nicholas: “Sorry, Santa. These kids are ignorant. Come on. You got work to do.”

The older guys—and the teenagers—led Santa through the housing project, calling children out to meet the jolly old gent. The young toughs, who minutes before were harassing poor Santa, were now organizing the children into lines, telling them to behave and to wait nicely for their chance to meet Saint Nick. It turned out to be an incredible afternoon.

“There isn’t a person living on that street who wouldn’t tell you that it’s a dangerous place, filled with drugs, crime, and hate,” Kent Nerburn writes of the experience. “But on that day, doors were opened, and we all had a glimpse into the unprotected human heart . . . what we saw was not hatred, but the deep and unquenchable desire to give and receive love.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, Santa Claus is not John the Baptizer, but in some ways he fulfills the same function as the Baptist. For Santa proclaims joy, love and goodness. He points our way toward a different heart, a different spirit. And that is what John the Baptist is proclaiming in today’s Gospel as he goes about preaching the changed heart of repentance, and the love, joy, and goodness of the coming of Christ.

One scholar has noted that baptism was not common in ancient Judaism, but was generally reserved for those converting to the faith. It followed upon repentance, and signified cleansing from the sins that were repented of.

Repentance is more than just being sorry we've sinned. The word itself connotes "a strong mind," and calls for an about-face, for a mind, a will, a spirit, that is turned in a new direction and will not go back the way it came.

True repentance is not simply remorse, or admitting our mistakes, or saying "What a fool I've been." These everyday rituals are common and easy. Real repentance brings about a moral and spiritual revolution. And for that reason, to repent genuinely is one of the harder things in life. Yet it is basic to all spiritual progress and change. It calls for a complete breakdown of our pride, of our overconfident self-assurance, and the prestige that comes from self-willed success.<sup>2</sup>

In the forefront of John's call for repentance was his sense of God's impending judgment. In Matthew's parallel text, he records that John chastised the religious leaders who were coming to him, urging them to "Bear fruit that befits repentance" . . . for "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" [MT 3:8 & 10].

John is saying to them and to us, turn your hearts toward God, but then go a step farther and act like it. Be like those teenagers in Kent Nerburn's story, who went from almost mugging Santa to leading little children to him. John proclaims that repentance and changed lives are what prepare the way for the coming kingdom of God. And it is in the person of Jesus Christ that John perceives God's reign as having come among us.

But what does that heavenly kingdom look like? For what are we to prepare the way through our changed hearts and new behavior? In godly repentance, clearly a reversal has taken place in our lives. And according to the prophet Isaiah in today's Old Testament lesson, dramatic reversals are always characteristic of the realm of God. Isaiah uses metaphors drawn from the earth: Every valley shall be lifted up, the mountains made low, the uneven ground made flat. What he means is that the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the Savior, will mean a reversal of all our notions.

- *Love* will mean laying down our lives for one another.
- *Justice* will mean vindication for the poor and the outcast.
- *Community* will mean inclusiveness, not exclusiveness.
- *Salvation* will be through God's grace—not our own righteousness or our own efforts.
- Even *the Messiah* Himself will be a suffering servant who has nothing, he will not be a conquering king with armies and wealth.

The kingdom of God that John is proclaiming will be—and still is—radically different from anything the people of his day—or ours—could imagine. Jesus was going to turn the religious establishment and the old hidebound traditions on their heads, because God had decided to do a *new thing*.

In *The Great House of God* [Nashville: Word, 1997], Max Lucado writes:<sup>3</sup>

"God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are they even like ours. We aren't even in the same neighborhood. We're thinking, *Preserve the body*; He's thinking, *Save the soul*. We dream of a pay raise. He dreams of raising the dead. We avoid pain and seek peace. God uses pain to bring peace. 'I'm going to live before I die,' we resolve. 'Die, so you can live,' He instructs. We love what rusts. He loves what endures.

We rejoice at our successes. He rejoices at our confessions. We show our children the Nike star with the million-dollar smile and say, ‘Be like Michael.’ God points to the crucified carpenter with bloody lips and a torn side and says, ‘Be like Christ.’

John was telling people the same thing. John the Baptist was looking for and eagerly awaiting the Messiah who would come to save His people. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, he knew that Jesus was the One of whom the prophets had spoken, and whom all Israel desperately needed.

Today, are we looking for Jesus? Will we recognize Him when He comes? Second Peter 3:12 urges us not simply to *wait* for the Lord, but to *earnestly desire* His coming as we await a new heaven and a new earth. How are we to wait? We are to found by the Lord “without spot or blemish and at peace”—with God, with ourselves, and with one another.

If we are looking for Jesus, are we looking for Him in all the wrong places? Are we simply staring up at the sky and hoping all the bad things of this world will just evaporate one day? Or are we looking around us here and now, to see Jesus in others, and looking inside us to see Christ in our hearts?

Jesus said “the kingdom of God is come among you.” He also taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” Ah ... The mystery of God’s kingdom is that it is simultaneously the already-with-us *and* the ‘not-yet.’ We can experience the kingdom of God each time we truly repent, each time we genuinely act differently than before. We experience God’s reign whenever we look at the world’s ways through the reverse lens of Jesus Christ’s love, justice, community, and salvation.

Today’s watchword is “prepare.” “Prepare the way of the Lord!” How? We are first to prepare room for Him in our hearts, that we might then lead others to Christ’s love and light. Yes, things are going to be different when we do things Jesus’ way. And the world will often condemn us—or laugh at and trivialize us—for doing just that. But is there any other *truly safe* path to walk?

Jesus is coming again, dear friends, and this time it will be to *judge* the world. Therefore, let us be earnestly desiring His coming, looking for Him with joy, and living our lives as though we truly believe in that glorious day. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “The Ministry of Santa,” *Connections: Third Sunday of Advent, Dec. 15, 2002* (Media Works, 7 Lantern Lane, Londonderry, NH 03053-3905). Quoted in a sermon for Advent 3B, “Make Straight the Way of the Lord” by Fr. Jerry Fuller, o.m.i., St. William’s Church, P.O. Box 367, Gainesville MO 65655, via <padre@TRI-LAKES.NET> December 6, 2002. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Based on commentary from *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 7, Matthew – Mark (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), p. 649.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from material quoted in Max Lucado, *Grace for the Moment* (Thos. Nelson: 2000), p. 370.