

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Preparing the Way”**

**Isaiah 40: 1 – 5
Matthew 3: 1 – 12**

Second Sunday of Advent

December 7, 2014

Several years ago, Sylvia and I visited some out-of-town friends who, within the next few weeks, were expecting the arrival of a newborn son or daughter. We showed up at the house, took off our coats and gloves, chit-chatted for a little while... and then Sylvia asked what seemed to me to be a rather curious question: “*So, can we see the baby’s nursery?*”

“*See the baby’s nursery?*” I’m thinking to myself... “*There is no baby yet! Why on earth would these people already have a nursery in their house? Come on, Sylvia! Has it been **that** long since our own kids were babies?*”

I was about to make some wisecrack about my wife’s obvious mistake, but before I could say anything witty, our hosts cheerfully answered, “*Sure! It’s right at the top of the stairs!*” So, up the stairs we went. And, sure enough, right at the top of those stairs... and right next to the master bedroom, was a wonderful, beautiful, delightful child’s nursery! And in this wonderful room, what do you think we found?

Well, no baby... at least I was right about **that** much! But we **did** find blankets to keep someone warm... and a crib, complete with Big Bird bumper pads, in which someone could sleep... and music boxes ready to be wound up and listened to... and a fully stocked changing-table complete with powder, diapers, baby oil, and three jars of Vaseline, just waiting to be bounced around on by some bare-bottomed little kid!

We found baby books, and a baby bathtub, and a high-tech baby stroller, and a little baby lamp with Mickey Mouse smiling away on it! Someone had even stenciled Teddy bears and rainbows on all the walls! Everything was in order... every item was in its place... everything that should have been there, **was** there... everything, that is, **except the baby!**

The baby wasn’t due for nearly a month... but our friends wanted to be prepared. So they bought what they thought they’d need; and they went to all their baby showers; and they read all their books; and they made all their plans; so that when that baby finally **did** arrive at their home **they would be ready!** Ready to be good parents... ready to take good care... ready to do a good job at all they’re supposed to do. And that’s just a fact of our lives, right? When someone’s coming into our home, whether it’s a newborn baby or out of town guests... we want to be ready, we want to be set, **we want to be prepared.**

And as we reflect on our gospel lesson this morning from Matthew’s gospel, we find John the Baptist echoing that very same theme of preparedness... as he invites the people of Israel, and you and me, too, to make ready for the coming of the Messiah, the

revelation of the Christ. Matthew's description of John fits the "preparation" bill perfectly:

"John was the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: a voice of one crying in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

The sight of John, emerging from the Judean desert with his grasshoppers and his honey and his camelhair suit would have been proof-positive to the people of Israel that the Messiah was on His way. In dress... in speech... and in manner, John was emulating Elijah: the prophet whom it was believed would return just before the coming of the Messiah. All the signs pointed to the Messiah's arrival; the prophetic message suggested it; the peoples' expectations were attuned to it; and John's own words confirmed it:

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry."

There could be no misunderstanding the message: the Messiah was on His way! The Savior... the Deliverer of Israel... God's promised One... was coming! And on the eve of this all-important arrival, John gives the same instructions that we already follow instinctively, whenever someone is about to arrive in one of our own homes: *"Get ready! Prepare yourselves! Make sure that all is in order, and that everything's in its place!"*

And that's the word for the day: **Prepare!** But, how? By cooking a let-out-all-the-stops, everything-fit-for-a-king holiday dinner? **Get ready!** But, how? By preparing a room as we would for a newborn child or an out of town guest? **Have everything in order!** But, in what way? By mopping and dusting and tidying up the house from basement to attic and all points in between?

Well, not exactly. When we hear that the Messiah is coming, that Jesus Himself is on His way, what needs to be prepared isn't our homes, or our lawns, or our guest rooms, or our dinner tables. **What needs to be prepared is our lives... our minds... our souls.** In order to make ready for the coming of the Son of God, we need to prepare a place in our hearts... a place in which He will have room to shape us, and mold us, and re-create us for His blessed and holy use.

And how does John tell us to prepare ourselves? Well, by turning our attention toward God, and away from that which distracts us... and disorients us... and deceives us. The Greek word which John uses is μετανοια, (metanoia) which we translate as "repentance." And repentance means to turn around, to change, to become different, to face Almighty God with an open heart and an open spirit, that He might make us into people who are more and more like He is.

"Repent!" John says, *"For the kingdom of heaven is near! Turn away from evil, and turn your hearts toward God. And He will give you the Holy Spirit... and He will make your life new... and He will fill your life with joy, and hope, and peace, and meaning that no-thing and no one will ever be able to take away from you!"*

Preparing ourselves for the arrival of Jesus involves genuine, intentional change at the level of the heart: change which will make God more real to us... change which will make us more receptive to the presence of Christ in our midst... change which will open

our eyes to the truth about ourselves, and those places in our lives where we really do need to do some things differently.

Preparing for the arrival of Jesus means having the honesty and the courage to admit to ourselves that we aren't yet fully the people that God intends us to be... that we really do at times succumb to the corrupting influence of evil... that we sometimes cling too tenaciously to our lifestyles, or our reputations, or our own agendas for life, forgetting that we would *have* nothing and we would *be* nobody, apart from the grace and love of our Heavenly Father.

But, preparing for the arrival of Jesus means even more than that: because genuine repentance is more than the simple acknowledgement of sin or the need to be more godly. It's the corresponding personal commitment to take the next step and actually do something about it. In other words, to repent is not just to say, "Hey, I need to change!" It's to say, "I need to change... and by the grace of God, I *will* change!" And then going out and making a good faith effort to make that change happen.

Some years back a friend of ours told us about her efforts to break her four-year-old son of his thumb-sucking habit. She told her son that she would give him a dollar, if he'd go the whole day without sucking his thumb. Well, you can imagine this young boy's reaction: "Great mom! I'll never suck my thumb again! I want that dollar!"

Well, everything went along fine that day... until about three o'clock in the afternoon; when our friend realized that she couldn't find her son anywhere. And, after searching through the whole house, she finally found the boy hiding out under the dining room table... and sucking his thumb furiously. And, when he saw his mother peering in at him under the table, he looked up and said, "*Mom, please, just give me two minutes alone with my thumb!*"

Recognizing the need to change and grow is one thing... taking the steps, and facing the risk, and enduring the discomfort of making that change *happen*, requires something extra. But it's that extra effort... that decisive commitment for a real change in direction... that opens the door for Christ to enter our lives in new and meaningful ways, and to become more real and present to us than He ever was before! And that, at the end of the day, is a big part of what being a Christian disciple is really all about.

During this Advent season, we give special emphasis to a fact which we believe to be true every day: the fact that Jesus is coming... the fact that He's knocking on the door of our hearts... the fact that He wants to be deeply, and intimately, involved in our lives. And in this Advent season, we ask ourselves the question: "*How will we prepare to receive Jesus as He comes to us, and tries to make His home with us, in new and meaningful ways?*"

How will we make ourselves ready to receive the news of Jesus' birth in a way that will really change us? In what new ways will we accept the challenge to turn our hearts more fully to God in the new year that's on the horizon?

If you're like Sylvia and me, one of the ways in which you're preparing is by pulling out the Christmas decorations... and sending greeting cards to the four corners of the earth... and maybe putting up a Christmas tree. There may be Christmas music playing on the family stereo... a phenomenon which would start in my house in about

mid-July, if Sylvia had her way about it! You may be planning a trip somewhere to visit family... or friends and family may be traveling to come visit you. Even if money is a little tight, most of us are probably planning to do at least some “shopping till we drop.”

And these activities may have become such deeply traditional family events that they hardly speak the language of “change” to us anymore. But they *can* speak that language... if we’ll allow them to! As we’re touched and blessed by the music of the season... and the beauty of the ornaments and decorations... and dinners with beloved family and friends... and the sharing and receiving of gifts... and all the other traditions which have come to define this season for us, let’s be encouraged to remember the true source and the real meaning of all those wonderful traditions.

Let’s insist that our preparations during this busy season not distract us from noticing Christ’s presence among us... but instead, remind us of His presence and His love. Let’s see every ornament, every gift, every card, every get-together not as superficial ends in themselves... but as deeply meaningful reminders of the fact that Jesus really is standing at the door of our hearts, knocking, and asking to be welcomed in and to make His home with us.

And let’s not stop there: let’s be challenged to think of new ways to prepare ourselves during this Advent season... ways that will represent real change for us. Maybe this can be a time for more intentional and committed study of the Scriptures... maybe it can be an opportunity to do a short family devotion every day... maybe it can be a time to cut back a little spending on ourselves, and to do a little more for those in our community who have little or nothing to look forward to this Christmas season. Maybe it can simply be a time for us to open our hearts to God and say, “Here I am Lord... here I am! What do you want to do with me today? What do you want to make of me, in the year that is ahead?”

Whatever we do, let’s do it with our eyes always on Christ. Let’s do it with the desire to become like Christ! Let’s do it to prepare the way for Jesus to come: to our homes, to our hearts, to our lives! If we have that approach and attitude, then even the most longstanding and traditional family activities can have the power to change us, and to renew us, and to make the Lord Jesus more and more real to us! And that’s what this season is really all about!

So, let’s prepare the way of the Lord! Let’s make His paths straight! And let’s be ready to be truly changed! Today, tomorrow, and all the days of our life!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!