

Preparation is the action of hope.

Hope is a radical and revolutionary way of living and being present in the world. When we are hopeful, it's a way of looking forward to the future and having faith that things will be even better than they are. Hope is the antidote to fear - both are rooted in acknowledging the reality around us, but one gives life and one takes it away. One is the foundation for new and everlasting life, and one is the foundation of destruction and self-centeredness.

Our Advent theme for this Sunday is hope, and what a gift it is to lean into this crucial part of our faith. The coming of Jesus into our world, into the beauty and brokenness of human life, is an incredible way to have faith that things will be even better in the future. It's important for us to recognize the power of hope, the power of life, the power of Christ who is coming to make all things new, now and always. Even when our world seems most broken and difficult and sinful and exhausting, there is still hope to be found in Christ Jesus.

When we are hopeful for what is to come, we are much more able to prepare ourselves in a way that gives and sustains life even in the journey of the preparation, not only when the destination or end goal is reached. Think about the joy of nesting when expecting a new baby. The wrapping and arranging of gifts when Christmas morning is on the horizon. The cooking and tidying and fresh linens and planning when beloved people visit after a long time away. The preparation lends itself to hope for what is happening in the present and also not yet here.

Today's scripture readings are all about preparation, and Advent is a time of year particularly centered on preparation. What it actually looked like and meant to prepare the way of the Lord. To prepare for this arrival of the Messiah who had long been promised to the people of Israel. To prepare for the world as the people knew it to be changed forever. To prepare for this change by having enduring faith in the God who is faithful to every generation.

The words in today's Gospel reading actually come from John the Baptist, not Jesus. John is the one who proclaimed and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

To repent means to change your ways, to turn from what was wrong or sinful or evil, and turn towards what is right and just and rooted in love. These are the promises that we proclaim even now and even today in our sacrament of baptism. That because of God's great love and grace, the forgiveness of our sins, we are able to repent and turn towards the righteousness, justice, and truth of God in every time and place. Nothing will ever separate us from this deep and enduring love of God, and because of this great love, we are free to work for peace and justice, for love and hope, for joy and new life, for ourselves and for all of God's beloved people.

When John proclaims that the promised Lord is coming, he boldly shouts that we must make straight these paths for the Promised Messiah, Jesus. Making straight paths is not just about an easy access point down at the river Jordan where John does his baptizing, or a straight set of directions through the wilderness. But it's about the work leading up to and encouraged by this promised Messiah, Jesus. The work he does to set straight the paths of this world is the work of making the crooked straight, and the rough ways made smooth, of filling the valleys and bringing down the mountains, of making the path of following Christ accessible for all people. Not just physically, but in our minds and spirits and actions as well.

This work of preparation for Jesus is so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. So that all people receive these gifts of forgiveness and a loving Creator to turn to in every time and place. So that all people have access to Jesus, the one who comes to us in life-saving grace and life-giving love. So that the world will be turned right side up when Christ comes into the world, and that we as the called body of Christ will be the ones to make that righteousness reality for our neighbors. So that truly all people will be welcomed into the arms of Christ, saved by his unending grace, and united in love to God our Creator and Father of life itself.

Advent is a season centered on preparation, in addition to anticipation. Where anticipation feels stuck in our minds and bodies, more of an idea and feeling, preparation allows the physical actions and living into the moment that helps us greatly. As one of my favorite teachers on the internet, Sharon McMahon says, "The antidote to despair is action." So if the anticipation alone gets us stuck in a mental and emotional cycle of despair, where we feel hopeless and overwhelmed, may even the smallest action fill us with the hope of this season. Preparation is hope in action, the action of anticipation and helps us move away from despair and into hope. Into light. Into the tried and true promises of a life in Christ.

There are so many parallels between the vast and detailed preparations we undergo for Christmas and the season of preparation we are called to in Advent, but I wonder about the disconnect that is so often present between the two. Christmas preparation energy is so often frenetic, rooted in items and buying things and super high, emotionally charged expectations and revisiting difficult dynamics with family. But yet, in Advent, the church season meant to prepare us for the joyous birth of Jesus Christ, we are encouraged to keep a contemplative energy, reflective and prayerful. Usually if we do too much reflecting on the common Christmas energy of frenzy and overwhelm we start to react negatively, with stress and unhealthy coping skills and may or may not shed some tears into yet another batch of cookie dough or gift wrap.

What if we changed things up, if our actions of preparation for Christmas actually matched the energy of the season of Advent? What would happen if we truly lived into the themes of Advent, peace, hope, love, and joy? Where could you find even little moments of these things in your preparation? A moment of peace, a reorienting toward hope, actions of love for others and yourself, and joy for what the season can be?

I pray, dear friends, that as the hope of Christmas fills so much of our life, that you will take time to enjoy the preparations and journey along the way. I pray that the hope we have, even beyond the birth of Christ on Christmas, hope for a life centered on Jesus himself, fills you with joy and excitement

for the actions needed. I pray that you will lean on the love and support of others in the body of Christ who are on this journey of hope with you to help you when you need that encouragement for what is yet to come. And I pray that the hope Jesus brings, in his new life, in his steadfast love for humanity, in his unending grace and forgiveness of sins, fills you and guides you to have faith that good and loving things are still yet to come. Thanks be to God, Amen.