

GET READY!

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

Faith Community
December 4, 2005

Introduction

You buy your ticket, go to the refreshment stand, and order popcorn and a drink. You've gotten there early enough to get a good seat, so you settle in, ready to enjoy the show.

A man comes to the microphone and introduces the person who is about to speak. He gives her credentials and background: where she went to school, books she's written, and her other accomplishments. He prepares people to hear what she has to say.

You are out at an expensive restaurant. Between courses the waiter brings you a small dish of sherbet to clear your palate. The sherbet clears away the previous taste and prepares you to enjoy a new one.

A couple is going to get married. They meet with pastor for six to twelve months before the wedding to do pre-marital counseling. Amid all the confusion of preparing for the wedding, they prepare for the marriage. In several sessions the couple discusses honesty, communication, and trust. They set aside time to focus attention on their relationship and how it can grow.

I

Those who prepare us help us clear the way for what is coming. They help us get ready. John the Baptist came to get people ready to receive Jesus, the Christ. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, and the amazing thing is that people flocked out from the cities to hear this unusual man speak.

If we are lucky in our lives, we have some people who go ahead and prepare the way for us. They smooth some of the rough spots, and level some of the hills we might have to face.

Comedians have a warm-up act that loosens up the crowd and prepares us to laugh at their jokes. Parents send their kids to preschool so they will be prepared for kindergarten when that time comes. Most of us who have older siblings know how they help prepare us for what is coming as we go through life. They've been there first and can help us face what's coming more easily.

It helps to have someone go ahead of you and prepare the way.

II

In this great season of Advent, we prepare for the celebration of Christmas and all that it means to our faith. We prepare by clearing away the distractions, preparing ourselves to listen, and focusing our attention on what is most important.

As the restaurant brings us sherbet and helps us to clear our palate, so in this season of Advent we clear our faith. We move back from the confusion and commerce going on around us and get ready to receive the Prince of Peace by clearing our minds and spirits. We work to keep the coming of God's only son separate from the selling, the Santa Clauses, and the ferocious advertising campaigns.

It's important for us Christians to separate what goes on in our culture, as "the holidays," from our meaningful celebration of Christ's birth.

We also prepare by listening. Someone comes to the microphone to introduce the speaker. "Our guest speaker today has shocked a lot of people. I know you've heard talk of his being crazy, but I think that is exaggerated, although I will warn you that he dresses a little funny – try to overlook the leather girdle around his waist and the locust wings that might still be stuck in his teeth. Our speaker today has spent years out in the wilderness, and has a lot to say. I encourage you to keep an open mind. Now, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome John the Baptist."

Those who introduce people prepare us to hear what is important. John the Baptist, as strange as he seems to us, prepares us and others to receive Christ.

In this Advent season, we do that preparation. We get ready to hear God speaking in our lives. We may need some quiet time, amidst all that is going on, to open our spirits to the Spirit of God. At various times in this season, we may need to stop and listen for what God is saying. Part of our preparation is preparing to hear God's word.

We prepare by focusing our attention. As the engaged couple meets to talk about their relationship and prepare for their marriage, so we take time to look at our lives and our relationship with God.

We focus ourselves on the meaning of this Christmas event. Sometimes that means stepping back from all the confusion going on around us and centering on what God has done. We see Christmas as a great celebration of God's love for us.

There is a wonderful little booklet that comes out each year called, "Whose Birthday Is It Anyway?" It is full of suggestions for celebrating the Christian meaning of this season. One that struck me was a little certificate that people can give that says, "Don't buy me a gift this year; I'd rather have something you made."

It encourages people to make something personal rather than buy more stuff, when most of us have more than we need. These kinds of suggestions help us focus on the meaning of Christmas.

Conclusion

It's often difficult for us to keep the heart of Christmas with all that is going on at this time of the year. Three suggestions can help us move through Advent with the full meaning of Christmas before us. First, clear the extraneous aside and separate it from what Christmas really means. Second, slow down and listen to God. And third, focus on what is most important. When we do that, we can keep the joy of this time through it all.

Amen