

Sermon
The Second Sunday of Advent
December 4th, 2022
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [ISAIAH 11:1-10; PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19; ROMANS 15:4-13;](#)
[MATTHEW 3:1-12](#)

Show me the way. Some of you may know the Peter Frampton song with this title. In it are these lyrics:

“But all I really want to know, oh won’t you show me the way?”

When I encounter this morning’s verses from Isaiah, I feel a longing to be shown the way to the peace that this passage describes. To be shown the way to this breathtakingly broad vision of a transformed world where all creatures live together, in peace.

In Isaiah, God’s people were geographically displaced, and they longed to be shown the way out of exile. They longed to be shown the way home.

Walter Brueggeman writes that "Exile is more than geographical...exile is when old securities are gone..." The people of Israel were geographically displaced, but they also experienced a loss of the structure and security that gave them meaning. They were homesick on every level.

After three years of pandemic, we have lost so much of the structure and security that has given us meaning. Many of us are homesick. Many of us are longing to be shown the way – out of years of pandemic, to a place of peace, to a feeling of home.

If we are longing to be shown the way, longing for a feeling of home, how does John the Baptist’s shouting in the desert to repent and to prepare the way of the Lord feel?

I was reminded this week of the difference between a path, a trail, and a route. A path is well worn, usually the easiest way, used by many, easily found. A trail takes us through wilder country. We need to look a little harder to find the way at times. A route is a temporary way around unexpected obstacles like a fast-flowing stream or an unstable snowpack.

In the last three years we've found ourselves on many routes. Many temporary ways around the obstacles of the pandemic. It's natural to feeling a longing for the well-worn path, the easiest way. If we are feeling that way, we might find John the Baptist's call to repent and to prepare the way a bit overwhelming. How to prepare the way? How to find the path – the way of the Lord – after three years of routes and detours? Where are we, now?

In their book “The First Christmas”, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg write about exile, and repentance – *metanoia* – reminding us that to repent is to turn to God. They highlight that in the Hebrew scriptures, the meaning is shaped by the Jewish experience of exile, and that repentance means to return from exile to the place of God's presence. The New Testament meaning of the word adds an additional nuance. In the New Testament, the root of the Greek word translated as “repent” means “go beyond the mind that you have,” to enter into a new mind-set, a new way of seeing. To repent means to begin seeing differently.

This makes “the way of the Lord” the path of return from exile to God's presence. To repent is to see differently, and to follow the way that leads out of our exile, separation, alienation, and estrangement to reconnection: with God and with each other.

This is what we prepare for in Advent, especially in this time we are in now, as we find our way through and out of three years of pandemic. John the Baptist's shouting in the desert is about preparing the way to reconnect with God, and to find meaningful connections with each other and our world.

The image of wheat and chaff that John the Baptist offers us is part of reconnecting. You might think this is about division rather than connection, about separating the good from the bad. You might find yourself spiraling into “Uh-oh: am I wheat or chaff?” I've got news for you: we're all wheat, and we've all got chaff. Every grain of wheat has a husk, and farmers (even today) use wind to separate these husks - collectively known as “chaff” - from the grain, the goal being, of course, to save every grain, not to separate the good grain from the bad grain.

Life is full of husks that get in the way of our homecoming, in the way of our connecting with God and with one another and our world. Husks like fear, apathy, self-absorption, harsh judgement, conflict. John the Baptist's call to prepare the way is not about finding the well-worn path and breathing a sigh of relief. It's about looking for the "husks" that inhibit our homecoming to God – our coming home to connection and peace and wholeness found in loving relationship with God and each other.

John the Baptist invites us to look for the husks that separate us from God and each other not so that we can feel guilty about them, but so that we can shed them. John says that he baptizes with water but that one who is coming – Jesus – baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. This is a refiner's fire! It's a fire that burns those husks of fear and apathy and self-centeredness so that growth and flourishing can happen.

In a few minutes we'll have an opportunity to generate another WordCloud. This week, we're guided by the questions:

What peace are you waiting for? What signs of peace do you see in the world?

There is unrest in us and in our world. There is peace that we are waiting for. There are "husks" that are inhibiting our homecoming to God, and to living into the potential and possibility that God dreams for us. We look for signs of peace to remind us of that potential and possibility.

Our lives are about paths, trails and routes to God and to one another. Our lives are a long homecoming, with paths, trails and routes to get there. We look for signs of hope and peace and joy and love along the way in our homecoming.

On Wednesdays at "Pausing for Prayer in Advent" on Zoom we reflected on a poem by Marilyn Chandler MacIntyre called *A Reflection on Finding your Way: What To Do in the Darkness*.

Go slowly
Consent to it
But don't wallow in it
Know it as a place of germination
And growth

Remember the light
Take an outstretched hand if you find one
Exercise unused senses
Find the path by walking in it
Practice trust
Watch for dawn

These are resonant words in this time we are in. Go slowly. Consent to the darkness and trust that there is growth happening. Take an outstretched hand if you find one. If we are to find the path by walking in it in the dark, we have to go slowly. Gently.

The image in Isaiah of the shoot from the stump of Jesse – new life springing forth from what had been cut down – was an assurance that God would lead Israel out of exile – that God would lead them home. There is assurance for us still, today, as it reminds us that new life will spring forth from what has been cut down, from what appears to be dead. We will find our way home.

For us, as Christians, it's Jesus who shows us the way home. Jesus is our reminder that whether it's a path, a trail or a route that gets us there, God is always inviting us home to a place of connection. To a place of belovedness. To a place of peace and wholeness, a place of growth and flourishing.

May we all find a path, a trail or a route to God this Advent, and may our actions make paths, trails and routes for others. In Jesus name. Amen.