

“God is Near: Prepare with Hope”

1. Raise your hand if your mom used to tell you (or still tells you) to make your bed every morning
 - a. I will NOT ask you to raise your hand if you actually do what your mom told you
 - b. But I will tell you that I just assumed, as a kid, that all people made up their beds daily, especially adults. Adults are responsible, right?
 - c. I remember distinctly being in college at a party held by a professor at their home.
 - i. I got up from a chair in the living room where we were all sitting, and I asked if I could use the bathroom, and the professor pointed me in the right direction.
 - ii. It was a bathroom across the hallway from their bedroom. The bedroom door was open.
 - iii. And, what do you know, their bed was unmade. Like they had jumped out of the bed because the house was on fire unmade!
 - iv. I stood in the hallway, looking into the bedroom. I couldn't believe it.
 - v. I had never noticed a grownup NOT make their bed in the morning.
 - vi. The teacher knew we were all coming, and still didn't make the bed?
 - d. Many of us, when we anticipate the arrival of company, will do extra cleaning around the house
 - i. Some of us ONLY clean when we're having company, but let's not dwell on that
 - ii. If you know that a relative is coming to spend a few days for the holidays, let say, then you work to clean the extra bedroom, and you pick up around the house.
 - e. Preparing for that arrival gets the whole family involved in the preparations.
2. Today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent, a season of preparation.
 - a. It is the beginning of the Christian Liturgical year
 - b. It is the season of preparation for the arrival of Jesus at Christmas.
 - c. In fact, Advent comes from a Latin word meaning “Arrival” and so, like when expecting a guest, this is the time for preparing, for straightening up (hopefully not a full house remodeling, but just cleaning things up a bit).
 - d. And what exactly are we preparing? Well, we're preparing ourselves for a new reality, a brand new thing.
 - e. We know that the Gospels each start differently

- i. They all try to offer the legitimacy of the person of Jesus, to clarify the source of his authority and power.
 - ii. Matthew starts with Jesus' family tree, all the way to Abraham.
 - iii. Luke starts with the miraculous stories of the birth of John and of Jesus.
 - iv. John starts with Jesus as The Word going all the way back to The Beginning of creation
 - v. Mark, on the other hand, is very much to the point, starts with a proclamation and the entry point is declaring Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah, the Chosen one) and as the Son of God, along with the words of the prophets and of John the Baptizer, as our translation calls him.
 - f. John the Baptizer didn't use the word Advent when he was doing his preaching, but he was telling people to prepare for this arrival. He says: "There is one coming after me who is more powerful than I am"
 - i. He was trying to get people to get ready for Jesus' arrival
 - ii. And the preparation for them included a very specific thing: confessing their sins
 - iii. Cleaning house, as it were, but cleaning inside their hearts.
 - iv. Or, to use the other image from the prophets used in the passage: making the path straight – meaning: creating a direct route, so that there is no way for the one sent from God to get lost or delayed.
 - g. Try to picture this sentence as a scene in a movie "people from all the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to [John] and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins" (Malina p.174)
 - i. It's a diverse crowd, coming from rural Judea and urban Jerusalem
 - ii. It's an unusual journey – why would one go to the dangerous wilderness?
 - iii. It's clearly a movement – all this attention and basically for a matter of faith.
 - h. And with a captive audience John tells them: oh but wait for the guy coming after me!
 - i. THAT's the guy we've all been waiting for (the Messiah, the Chosen one from God)
3. Because of John's message, our overall theme for this year's Advent season will be "God is Near"
- a. I say this letting the phrase have both meanings of "near"
 - i. It can mean God is on the way, and almost has arrived (Advent). God is Near
 - ii. But also it can mean God is ALREADY here, so close to us we can feel God's presence (Emmanuel means God is with us) God is Near us
 - b. So because God is near (in both of those senses), we are called to prepare our hearts to start anew, to look with hope into a new reality God brings about

- c. It may feel particularly challenging to feel like we can prepare with Hope, considering all the difficulties we face in our personal economies, or the severe polarization of our society, or the horrific effects of terrorism and war in the Middle East.
- d. There is a little sentence John says which may go right past us: “There is one coming after me who is more powerful than I am.”
 - i. That’s how we prepare in hope, not feeling a burden that we have to create a better world under our own power
 - ii. But to really release our present and our future in to God’s hands, into the person of Jesus, the one more powerful than you or I.
 - iii. That allows us to speak against fear, strife and war with the words and presence of Jesus, not with our own clever arguments or stubbornness.
 - iv. Preparing with Hope for the arrival of Jesus is an exercise of surrender
 - 1. of saying I can’t on my own: Jesus take the wheel!
 - 2. That’s at the heart of confession: I can’t go on like this, please release me from this a self-centered journey
- 4. Perhaps no amount of preparation will ever keep us from being surprised at the arrival of Jesus, with his unapologetic love for all, with his incessant breaking down of barriers, with his enduring call to follow him in the journey. But we prepare nonetheless, like cleaning up awaiting the arrival of the guest we long to embrace.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-11-8-6>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-11-8-4>

Reflection Questions

1. Share a story of preparing your home to welcome someone special to your home (maybe a new child, or a long-absent relative).
2. Would you have used Mark 1:1–13 as a passage to get us thinking about Advent? Why or why not?
3. What is one area of your heart which most needs “cleaning up” before welcoming Jesus as its guest (It could be a grudge, an insecurity, a thing to finally let go)?