

Advent is a complicated season. It is a season that is full of the paradox of “now” and “not yet,” a season in its own right, with themes and texts and songs and characters all its own, while at the same time it serves as a sort of introduction to a whole different season—with its own themes and texts and songs and characters and actions. We see it, we hear it we feel it in the way that our Advent unfolds here at Christ the King: in the midst of so much talk of waiting and anticipating and preparing, much of what we think of as our Christmas traditions here happen well before December 24. The Smorgasbord later this afternoon. The Pageant, when some of our youngest members lead us in worship and present the Christmas story to us in word and music and drama. The Christmas concert, when our Music Ministry, led by our own Sanctuary choir, presents us with the Good News through the gift of music, sharing familiar and not-so-familiar songs that get to the heart of the season. Even so much of our social ministry—our extra giving through the Global Mission Team’s Alternative Christmas Presents for our companions in Tanzania, or the Angel Tree gifts, show this now-and-not-yet tension I’m talking about. There is a whole lot of Christmas happening already in our Advent. It’s like we literally can’t wait.

I used to be a lot grumpier about this sort of “jumping the gun” of Advent, about how Advent needs to be a season unto itself, with all things Christmas held off until December 24, with an emphasis more on the Twelve Days of Christmas which BEGIN on Christmas Eve and go all the way through to Epiphany on January 6. When I was right out of Seminary, I must have had a bit of the wild-eyed fanatical prophet in me, like the counter-cultural weirdo John the Baptist with his camel skin tunic, wild beard and strangely ahead-of-its-time Paleo diet of locusts and wild honey. While I didn’t adopt that look or that diet, I thought of myself in many ways as that voice: the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Keep Advent in Advent, I’d say. Save Christmas for Christmas, I rant. No Christmas songs in Advent. Not quite a “bah humbug” approach to Christmas, although I’m sure it came off that way a lot of the time.

I’d like to think I’ve mellowed a bit on that score over the years. And I can tell you at least in part how that change came about. In my article in the December newsletter, the Herald, I wrote briefly about one of the traditions we had when we lived and served as missionaries in Senegal in West Africa. The members of the ELCA missionary community, along with a few others from similar missions, would often gather on the Sunday after Thanksgiving to share in this American feast with other Americans, since, naturally, we didn’t get that Thursday off. But since most of the time, the Sunday right after Thanksgiving was also the First Sunday in Advent, we’d segue from Thanksgiving into Advent with a rousing hymn-sing. We had copies of the green hymnal—the LBW—along with the blue one—With One Voice—and we would begin by calling out hymn numbers in the Advent section, and once we had pretty much sung ALL of those, we’d keep going until we had sung ALL of the

Christmas sections, too, along with selections, believe it or not, from Handel's Messiah. Talk about a bunch of church nerds having fun on a Sunday afternoon, right? Seriously, this event, as I wrote earlier, was started largely out of nostalgia, out of longing for a particular kind of Advent and Christmas that we missionaries missed, since the traditions and trappings and songs of Advent and Christmas were so different there in Senegal. It was also a great time of community, at first with nearly 20 of us from the ELCA, and perhaps even more so at the end of our time there, when there was just us and one other family, four adults only—who covered, miraculously enough, four parts well enough to sing in harmony on most all of the songs. The irony in all this, of course, is that something that began out of nostalgia for a particular kind of Advent and Christmas back home is now one of the things I miss most and long for the most from our Senegal days. [Actually, the rest of our quartet is here today—Pastor Dirk and Sarah Stadlander, now serving in Colorado]. The effect has been that it's made me a lot less strict about keeping Advent in Advent, and much more open to letting Christmas spill over a bit ahead of time.

Which believe it or not actually has a lot to do with our gospel reading today. This character of John the Baptizer—that's the way he's referred to in the newest translations of the bible, for he was no more Baptist in the way we usually mean it than he was Presbyterian or Catholic or Lutheran or Methodist. Actually, he's Jewish, through and through. And to the first-century Palestinian Jews, he would not have appeared as some random crazy man, but rather his words, his actions, his dress, his manner, would have been understood by particular people at a particular time.

He is the voice, crying in the wilderness, we are told. He looks the way he does, he acts the way he does, he says the things he says because just ahead of the messiah, the anointed one, the chosen one of God, a prophet just like this—someone who looked, acted and sounded just like John, was supposed to appear. That's what other prophets, like Isaiah, had said. This person, looking, acting, sounding just like John, would be the one to prepare the way for God's messiah.

John the Baptizer is a sort of personification of this spilling over of Advent into Christmas, the blending and bridging of the prophets of the Old Testament into the good news of the New Testament, and in his story we see that blending, that bridging, that spilling over. Yes, he is the voice crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. At the same time, his very presence signals that this preparation is about to come to completion, that the one whose way he is preparing is nearly arrived. There is an urgency in his voice, in his crying out in the wilderness. Like other prophets before him, John embodies the preparation he calls out in others: prepare, make straight, repent, believe, he says. There is one coming after me who is more powerful than I, he says. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Son of God, Mark adds as he puts this story right up front in his telling of the Gospel. "The *Beginning* of the Good News," more a title than a first line of his book, meaning that everything else Mark has to say about Jesus from John the Baptist and right through to the end, all the preaching, teaching, healing, even Jesus' death and

resurrection, that is *only the beginning* of the good news. The story isn't over. There's still more to come. Which means we are all invited to continue the story of the good news of Jesus as God continues to write the Gospel of Jesus in and through our lives as individuals and communities.

These past few weeks, we have heard, and struggled to hear, and not been fully able to hear a number of different prophetic voices crying in the wilderness, voices in Ferguson and Cleveland and Staten Island and elsewhere in our nation and in our world. We have heard the voices echoing Isaiah's words "what shall I cry?" who lament with the prophets the injustices, the violence, the brokenness of so much of our society's systems. We've struggled to hear in these voices glimpses of hope, glimpse of peace, glimpses a time when the wolf shall live with the lamb, when enemies become friends, when oppressor and oppressed are reconciled to one another. When bitterness gives way to forgiveness, and conflict and retribution are set aside in favor of peace and reconciliation.

At the same time, we've struggled with our own questions right here as a congregation, as a faith community. We've struggled with our own sense of grief and loss, of confusion and uncertainty, of difficult transitions and unimaginable tragedies. We've struggled individually and collectively, struggled to live in this paradox of already and not yet. Yes, we know that God is here with us, and at the same time we wait for God to be revealed again and again, in new and meaningful ways. We live caught between these seasons, asking "What shall I cry?" and "how long, O Lord," "what are you waiting for, God," and at the same time hearing words of comfort and joy, sometimes in our own voices, "comfort, o comfort ye my people," "speak tenderly to them that their waiting is over, that their penalty has been paid, that their sins have been forgiven." Tell them again and again here is your God. That this God for whom you wait, this Emmanuel, is already here.

In the midst of our waiting, in the midst of change, in the midst of grief, in the midst of uncertainty and suffering and tragedy, may we hear the prophet's cry addressed to our ears, our lives. May we hear these words of comfort, tenderly spoken to us as they were tenderly spoken to others so long ago. Here is your God; our God is here. See, the Lord God comes with might, God's arm rules for him; God's reward is with him. The Lord God, the one for whom we wait, is already here, this God of ours will continue to feed us like a shepherd feeds his flock; this God will continue to gather us in his arms, to carry us, and to gently lead us as a loving shepherd gathers, carries and leads his sheep.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness. The voice says, "What shall I cry out"

Here is our God. Our God is here. Amen.