

Usually, in preparing to preach here at Church of the Resurrection, I not only pray on the scripture lessons, I read all the sermons preached here, in this place, in the last four or five lectionary cycles. This isn't as hard a task as you might think. Years ago, I gathered the old sermons up, digitally speaking, and indexed them according to our three-year lectionary cycle.

This practice of reading what's been preached here has given me a lens through which to understand your previous Rectors—the two people on whose shoulders I stand each week when I stand in this particular spot. And I get to see what the gist of their concern, over time, was for this church.

They both, by the way—as many of you know firsthand—were very good preachers. Almost as good as our seminarian, AnnaMarie Hoos, is going to be.

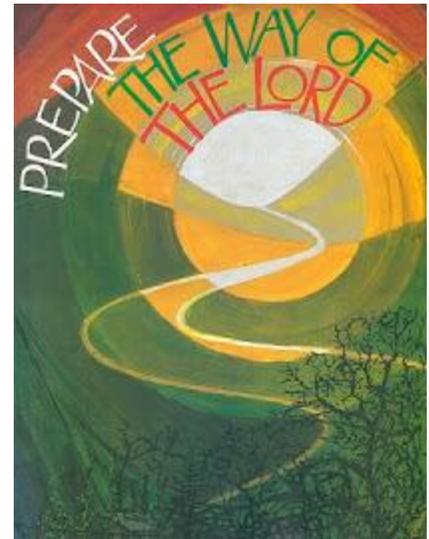
At any rate, this past week I read in a sermon that the Rev. Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie preached here in 2005 that she was concerned about your souls, your individual souls. Dr. Ritchie wanted you to use the weeks of Advent to grapple with the pile of stuff that might have accumulated in your life and the need to stop meandering around the mess and do something to straighten up your God-lives. Her message was John the Baptist's ancient message, "Repent!"

This makes me wonder, "What were you all up to?" (Mine is strictly a pastoral interest, you understand!)

All joking aside, Advent is a time when we are each, individually, supposed to examine our life. We are to take stock. Clean house, so to speak. Because God is coming anew once again. And we need to get ready to welcome God into our lives. Maybe we have let our God-lives slip a bit. If so, the way we are now is not the way we have to be.

Are you excited that Jesus is on his way to us anew? Or—ho hum—are you thinking, "Been there, seen that; big deal?"

Lenore and I have a family saying she's allowed me to share with you. We were living in London, and one day one of us looked up and said, "Ho hum, Big Ben." We knew right then it was time to return home. But that saying came home with us. Now whenever we see something truly spectacular, one of us says, "Ho hum, Big Ben."





Has Advent become all Big Ben to you? If so, maybe the commercialism is the issue. Maybe the rat race and crowds are getting in the way. Or parties, concerts, events, shopping, cooking, lines, etc., all just chores to do. Or maybe Advent depresses you. Has your LIFE become all Big Ben, trapped in our little realities, be they health-related, or simply due to failing energy or inertia?

But has the Christ Child become Ho Hum, too? I sincerely hope not.

Mark's gospel doesn't even mention a Christ Child. No pregnant Blessed Virgin Mary. No long-suffering Joseph. No angelic visits or heavenly hosts. No magi, even. Just this: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

You might think that this invalidates Mark's witness. You might think that this makes Christ Jesus' miraculous birth untrue. I have another theory. The Gospel According to Jo Belser is this: Mark is written for US, for our time, for our skeptical, scientific brains that demand to know how God does the things God does before we believe them. We say, "If a virgin birth were scientifically possible, I would believe." But when we figure out how God accomplished this miracle, and instead of believing we declare the theological equivalent of, "Ho hum, Big Ben."

See, Mark cuts right to the meat in HIS gospel. No matter how God delivered himself into human history, Mark declares that God accomplished this in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And for Mark's proof he didn't dabble in science, but in scripture. Mark reminds us that the prophet Isaiah had foretold the coming of the Messiah and that there would be someone ahead of him in the wilderness preaching repentance.

Here's where Dr. Ritchie's 2005 sermon comes in. She shared a discovery she had made in a commentary that there were no public works projects in early Palestine. She was a lot more delicate than I'm going to be. The "vehicles" back then had "exhaust" that accumulated on the ground rather than in the air. And the "roadway" would veer around piles of... exhaust... lest they be stepped in. Hence, the roads got curvy with accumulated... stuff. And chokepoints, such as the entry into town, received a lot of accumulated "exhaust."

When a dignitary was coming to visit, the locals would clean up, prepare the way, and make the roads leading into town to be straight again. Those cleaning up the mess would sell the compost to local farmers and haul the rest to the dump. Sorting was required.

So, this is what Mark is urging us to do today, channeling Isaiah and John the Baptist: “Clean up our mess; get ready. Our King and Savior now draws near.”

But before we can make the classical response, “Come, let us adore him,” I need to ask, “Have you prepared the way of the Lord, made his paths straight into your heart? Or are you thinking, ‘Ho hum, another Advent?’”



We know that we simply can’t change the reality of our lives all by ourselves. We need God’s help to change who we are. We need God’s help to extract us from the mess we may have made of our lives. We need God’s help to be the best self we can be. This is why God sent his son, Christ Jesus. This is why we hang out with each other each week and often in between, helping each other to clean up, get ready, and stay ready. No ho hum here.

Mark said that Jesus of Nazareth was the BEGINNING of the Good News. The ENDING of that same Good News is that Christ Jesus is coming back soon.

Prepare the way of the Lord; make his path straight.

Our King and Savior now draws near.

Come, let us adore him.