

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, in this season of darkness and anticipation, we seek our center and our hope. We come to hear the message anew, to live a life of Advent in this season and beyond. Holy God, we seek your justice, the justice that brings life to all people, the oppressed and the oppressors. Holy God, we seek your truth, the truth that will set all people free. Holy God, we seek your love, the love that brings all people to completion and true relationship with one another. With this spirit, God, we present ourselves to you, all of those things that are on our hearts and the prayers we speak to all, and ask you take them.

Holy God, in this season of anticipation and waiting, we seek to purify ourselves for receiving the Christ Child once again. We seek to hear the forerunner with the prophecies once again, for that age and for our age. Your messages are meant for them, meant for us, and meant for all time. Help us to see what really matters and to hear the messages that really matter. In this world of judging by looks, let us not pass up the prophets of today that speak with the same wisdom, the same authority, and the same Word of God that the prophets of old did, like John the Baptist. Help us to hear the messages today we are called by you to hear, not the messages we want to hear or the messages that make us feel good. In this season of preparing the way of the LORD, let our preparations be those that truly prepare the way of the LORD. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord who comes, and comes in ways that we do not necessarily expect, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

## SERMON

This Christmas, believe me, you will get one present that just isn't wrapped well. If you're my wife, you're going to get most of your presents not wrapped well...at least from

me. Our first Christmas together when we were engaged, she told me how important it was to have all the presents wrapped personally, so I set to work wrapping my presents for her. The going wasn't easy. In fact, there was a lot of wasted paper and an over use of tape. But, by golly, those presents got wrapped. They were wrapped and waiting for her under the tree when Christmas morning came. They weren't especially pretty; they weren't worth a lot of pictures or any sort of job that I'd leave the ministry for, but they were wrapped. She complimented my good effort (not my good job), and then they were lovingly unwrapped to find a lot of heartfelt gifts inside. On that snowy Christmas of 2012, I'll remember a lot: from driving home in a blizzard from our first Christmas Eve service here to my good ol' college try on really wrapping a large assortment of gifts.

I imagine that many of you have had a similar situation. You get a gift, and it looks like someone absolutely has no skill in the subject. It looks horrible, and even though it's a gift for you, the job makes it look like what's inside can't be all that great. The so-called "top" of the present has the bow, the tag, and a whole lot of tape spots and folds. But, as we all should know, the wrapping of a present means very little. The heart of the present is what is within. The present matters in the giver's thought of how it would uplift you and the joy in which it is presented. The meaning of a real present is knowing that what is within is something that will help you and lift you up. We know the wrapping doesn't matter, but we need to keep that in mind as we are presented with other gifts, the gifts that seem like they are the wrapping. But underneath that wrapping is a gift that will bring a greater blessing. Let us look at these "ugly wrappings for beautiful gifts" as we dive into the full stories around our two scripture lessons and see how those lessons are just as relevant today as they were to the ancient Israelites.

In the grand scheme of things, Mark is the, well, least exciting of the four gospels. There are no dreams to Joseph and flight to Egypt in Matthew. There's no great backstory of Elizabeth and Zachariah, not to mention the grand birth story of Luke. There's no majestic telling of the Word coming into the world of John. Mark begins the Gospel with a straightforward statement: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And where does the good news start? Mark starts with the rise of the one who comes before the Lord Jesus Christ: John the Baptist.

John claimed the authority that came with the prophecy of Isaiah, which we heard today and was quoted in Mark, but there's a lot more to this prophecy than we might see at first glance. It's a hard thing to read the book of Isaiah, as it is so steeped in the times it was written. So, let's look back through history. The Book of Isaiah, one of the major Prophets, has three distinct sections, each speaking to a specific time and context. Our scripture reading for today came from the very beginning of Isaiah's second section. The first section spoke in judgment to the Kingdom of Judah, the surviving member of the divided Kingdom. Chapter 39 ends with Isaiah speaking to King Hezekiah of Judah, telling him that Judah will be sent into exile by the Babylonians. That's where the first section ends. Between the first and second sections, sure enough, the Kingdom was exiled in Babylon. The second section here now speaks to the people suffering in exile, much later after Chapter 39. The tone completely shifts from judgment to comfort. "Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God," as God commands the prophet to speak to the people lost in exile. Entirely different. The people in exile have served judgment, and the God that they felt had abandoned them would come again in glory. "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God!" The Prophet is making way for God's coming to the

people once again. The darkness is over, and God will once again proclaim God's supremacy by coming in deliverance. God will arrive in a new way. God did come, but not in the way the people expected. Through the power of the Persians, who dominated the Babylonians, they were allowed to return to Jerusalem and re-establish the Kingdom. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in that time.

It would come to fulfillment once again. In that tradition, we have John the Baptist, a new prophet. John spoke in a new age from the time of Isaiah: the exiles came home a few centuries before to rebuild Jerusalem and Israel, only to fall a couple of centuries later to the power of the Romans. The original intent of the Isaiah passage had been fulfilled, but here was a new time for it to come true once again. The people were once again in exile, albeit under the rule of an outside force in their own land. But God was about to do another thing, another miraculous thing. Here was a new messenger in the desert preparing the way of the Lord, a way that would shake the people's expectations. God's word and power came in a new way through a messenger they did not expect or acknowledge. What do we know about John the Baptist? Do you see the image on the front of your bulletins? It's not accurate. This John the Baptist looks far too clean and well taken care of. The real one would be much more grizzled and wild looking, not a nice and friendly image they would publish on bulletins. He was rough around the edges. He wasn't diplomatic; no good prophet was. If you were going to be a prophet, you had to tell the flat truth. He told you like it was, whether you wanted to hear it or not. He was clothed with camels' hair and wore a simple leather belt. His diet left something to be desired by our standards; he ate locusts and honey. He lived a rough life, but all these things did not amount to a present to judge by its wrapping; there was much more to him than his looks

and how he lived out his calling. The truth he spoke validated him and his message. Despite all the ways that he wasn't pleasurable to see by the eyes, he did his job, and he did it well. People believed him. People came to him. People wanted his expertise and wisdom, despite all that seemed to run against him. What may not have looked like the most appealing present on the outside exactly what God intended for the Israel of that day. But there's something new for our era.

Here we are in today's age, and I believe this prophecy rings true once again. In this season of Advent, we anticipate. We recall those events of the past, of the first coming of God to earth in the form of the child Jesus Christ. But that will not happen again as it did in that age. But, just like in that age, God is about to do a new thing. Like the people of that age, we think we know exactly what to expect. But do we? Perhaps not. The people of John's age believed the Messiah was coming with power and authority and prestige, riding a great horse and boasting an army that would destroy everything the Romans could muster. Did that happen? Nope. It didn't. The Messiah came as the lowliest of the lowly. The Anointed of God the Creator Almighty was not born in a palace or came to reside in the temple. God came to earth as a poor, poor child with a poor, poor mother and a poor, poor father in a shed. Let that sink in. God worked totally contrary to the way the people wanted and anticipated. Because it didn't happen the way the people wanted, many rejected the gift of the Christ child. Those who waited for God with open hearts found the gift as beautiful and worthwhile. God worked then as God always does: for the benefit of all people, and often in very secretive ways. God, before and now, provides a gift that must be unwrapped, but we may think the wrapping on the outside, not to our pleasure, invalidates the gift. Not so.

What does that say how God is showing up today? How are you expecting God to show up? Is God going to come in the walls of the church? Through the proclamation of the word? I hope so, but God also comes when God darn well wants to. Although we are not members, the United Church of Christ has a wonderful slogan: "God is still speaking." It is very true. God is never absent; God is still bringing about God's purposes to fulfillment. Perhaps God is working today in ways that we aren't expecting. Perhaps God is working in ways today that we don't acknowledge. Perhaps there are ways that a voice is crying out, proclaiming to prepare a way for God. And God is bringing about something new in those situations. Perhaps there are many more gifts around with ugly wrapping that have a God-given blessing within that we must unwrap together.

We must go to the most complex, the most difficult of situations to see where God is. The Prophets were never fully received, for they spoke a difficult and divisive message. In today's world, few situations are more difficult and divisive than the situations in Ferguson, Missouri with the death of Michael Brown and the death of Eric Garner in New York. Some want to declare that the police are entirely evil and abusing their power with no end. On the other hand, some people believe that those two men received their just desserts. I believe the answer is somewhere in the middle. I believe that God is working in Ferguson, Missouri. Could there be a voice in the wilderness crying out there, "Prepare the way of the LORD"? Is God speaking through the situations of Michael Brown and Eric Garner? Maybe God is working there in subtle ways that we can't always understand on the surface. In other words, perhaps this is a gift we need to unwrap to find the blessing, whether or not it has the most beautiful wrapping and whether or not the gift is easily received. Some gifts need time and space to really appreciate what it is. These are heartbreaking situations, no

matter where you stand on the issues. These are situations wrapped with violence, with anger, with tears, but there may be a blessing within that we can ultimately discover if we listen with hearts open, for God is there. There is space here for, as the scripture says, to lift up every valley and every mountain and hill made low. If we rush in and assume, we will be made low, but if we listen and truly seek to find where God coming, with our hearts ready for a new season of Advent, then we will be lifted up.

The prophets of old spoke clearly, "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." In the past, this prophecy came to fulfillment with the return from the exile and again with the coming of Christ. In this time of Advent, we are called to anticipate, but we should consistently anticipate something new. This prophecy has just as much meaning today as it did then, but just as it did not come to fulfillment in the same way twice, we will not see it come to bear in the same way either. God is still speaking today and speaking in ways that we may not see or may not expect. But God is still speaking and God is still working. When we yell and sing out the common refrain of "Come, Lord Jesus, Come," we must be prepared for how that happens...in the most expected or unexpected of ways. Thanks be to God, who is still speaking and challenging us to this day. Amen and Amen!