

The Second Sunday of Advent – December 8, 2019 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

“Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” Paul was speaking to the church in Rome when these words were originally written but they are words for us to hear today. They are words for us to take into our hearts and live by. Instruction, steadfastness, encouragement and hope.

Through the Apostle Paul, God is calling to us. Whenever and wherever we encounter darkness and despair, God is calling to us instructing us to have courage and to be steadfast. Steadfastness is an old fashioned word, a word not heard much in our present day. It means to hold on with all of your might for whatever comes your way. It means to dig your heels in and refuse to be moved.

Living on an island, many of you have probably stood on a beach in a storm. The waves are wild, the wind nearly blows you down and it is exhilarating, exciting and just a bit dangerous. You dig your feet into the sand and brace for the next gust, knowing that if you are steadfast, you will not topple over. That experience truly mirrors life with God, or at least what life with God can be like. Exciting, exhilarating, dangerous, encouraging and hopeful. It is the way we are instructed to live under God’s reign. It is the way that we can live when we take the words of scripture seriously, when we take them as instruction for us now, our marching orders if you will. Whenever great changes have happened it is because a group of people were steadfast in their resolve to make that change a reality. Again and again we can see where small groups have moved mountains.

John the Baptist was such a person, in the beginning just one person who opened the way for great change. He was the one who stirred things up, challenged the status quo and risked everything to follow the plan that God had laid out for him. From the moment he began to preach, John’s life was threatened. People who upset the status quo are not popular. We think of John as an unpleasant, odd, abrasive and probably smelly individual. I mean “brood of vipers???” Not the way most people expect to be spoken to.

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction...”. What is instructive for us about the story of John? Why do we read this story now in Advent, when our thoughts more drawn to Mary and the coming birth of the Christ Child? Each year in Advent we are called to prepare, not just for Christmas but to consider deeply what God has done in Jesus Christ, and what God continues to do. Advent, as the time of preparation is the time when we consider prayerfully what God is doing in the world and what is our part in that work. Advent is the time of pause when we prayerfully recommit to the plan God has for us. John prepared the way for Jesus and he did so with a steadfastness of purpose from which we can learn. If we get past the strangeness of camel hair clothing and a diet of locust and honey, there is much to discover from the way in which John prepared the way for Jesus.

“Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” John called people to repent, to examine their lives and measure themselves against what God was calling them to do and be. In the wilderness where John was preaching, vast crowds came out at great difficulty to hear this call to repentance. What compelled them to do so? It was not to be called “brood of vipers.” Rather they came because they recognized that they were stuck, unable to move in the direction to which God was calling them. They came because they believed that John had the answer. It was not an answer they expected to hear.

Repent, examine what you are doing that isn't working, that isn't bearing fruit. The next question becomes what is God calling us to be and do to live in accord with God's plan. It is now Advent in the life of St. Augustine in the Woods, Freeland Washington. I mean that not only as the time of the year on the calendar, but as the time you have reached in your life together as a community, a church. It is Advent, not as a season of the year but as a season of preparation for what comes next in this outpost of the kingdom of God. It is Advent, a time of preparation, repentance and examination to determine what God's plan is for this place, in this time. What is the fruit that God is calling you to bear for the world?

The past is the past, never to come up again, gone forever in time. What are we holding on to as a vestige of the past. What is preventing the flowering of this time at St. Augustine? How are we mired in what has been, both good and not so good that is preventing us from bearing a fruitful ministry now. What does the future hold which is another way of asking what is God up to and how can we get on board?

I have heard it said that St. Augustine needs to heal before moving forward. I say to you that in faith that we are healing and continue to heal. When Jesus healed, it was faith that made the healing a reality. We are healed when we begin to live as healed people. I have heard it said that St. Augustine is an aging congregation. I say to you that Abraham and Sarah were not young when they were called by God to leave where they dwelt and move to a new and unknown place. We can learn from Abraham and Sarah that we are never too old for God to work in our lives and for God to call us to new or renewed ministry. I have heard it said that St. Augustine as a congregation is growing smaller but I say to you remember the parable of the mustard seed and how a tiny seed yields a great tree. I have heard it said that resources are scarce at St. Augustine's, remember the story of the widow who gave all she had, her last penny. I say to you that resources here are not scarce but abundant. Resources here are not scarce but undiscovered. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near”. Actually the kingdom of heaven is and has always been in our midst. Square in the middle of St. Augustine's in-the- Woods. The kingdom of heaven is here now. The work of now is to open our eyes, hearts and minds to see what is here and what God is challenging St. Augustine to do and be.

How is God calling St. Augustine to “...prepare the way of the Lord,”. What is the straight path to which we are called the path that leads out of the bondage of the past and into the present of encouragement and a future full of hope? I am convinced that God has a wonderful plan, a fruitful plan for St. Augustine. Your best days, good as they were have not been in the past, your best days lie ahead. I have been with you for four months and I have

been convinced of the truth of all that I have said today. God is not done with St. Augustine's, in fact God is only beginning with what is possible for this place. I am committed to walking with in you in this journey for as long as necessary. I will warn you that you will weary of the things I have said as I will say them again and again in all kinds of conversations and context. I will confess to being a terrier and will be nipping at your heels.

To begin we begin with choice: It is always a choice to commit to preparing that pathway, to commit to the future and God's plan in that future. So, we begin with choice. And we recognize that we will be called to choose not once but again and again as we try to discern what God is up to and how we get on board with whatever God is up to. What we are about to engage in is hard work and will take time.

After choosing it is time to pray, Prayer, essential to the work we are about to do. Next is conversation, honest conversation about possibility without a rush to solution. If we talk about and identify possibilities and resources the solutions will come. And with those solutions, new challenges and new conversations. The time we spend in coffee hour is an excellent place to begin. As we gather around tables with food and coffee, talk about what I have said, respond, question, challenge. It is in these kinds of conversations that we will find not only direction but encouragement and hope for the future. Most of all, have faith, act in faith, that God is not done here but that God has much more in store.