

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Road

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

The Second Sunday of Advent (C)

December 9, 2018

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

DRAFT

Are we really in a Holy Season?

The Holy Gospel according to

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the

region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made

smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.””

Make straight our way to you, Dear Lord,
and prepare us for your coming. Amen.

I believe that behind the mist the sun awaits.

I believe that beyond the dark night it is
raining stars.

I believe in secret volcanoes and the world
below.

I believe that this lost ship will reach port.

They will not rob me of hope, it shall not be
broken,

it shall not be broken, it shall not be broken;

I believe in reason, and not in force of arms;

I believe that peace will be sown throughout
the earth.

I believe in our nobility, created in the
image of God
and with free will reaching for the skies.

They will not rob me of hope, it shall not be
broken,
it shall not be broken.

This poem is from Chile in 'Celebrating One
World', from the Catholic Agency for
Overseas Development (CAFOD) which is
the official aid agency of the Catholic
Church in England and Wales and part of
Caritas International.

Matthew 1:7-12, “Elijah has already come and they did not recognize him.”

Syria

Conflict rages in many countries and peace seems far off. Five years of war in Syria have killed thousands of people and millions have fled their homes.

“As President of Caritas Syria, I have chosen to stay so I can lead distributions of food and emergency supplies... But our

work is becoming harder, because more and more of our staff are leaving the country... We, and all Syrians, need peace above all else.”

Bishop Antoine Audo, Aleppo, Syria

‘Both John and Jesus preached repentance. We tend to think of repentance as feeling guilty, but repentance is more a DOING word than a FEELING word. Repentance is a change of mind or direction—seeing things differently—doing things differently.

‘Once we begin to see things rightly, we will probably feel bad about having seen them

wrongly for so long. But repentance isn't mostly about feeling bad. Repentance is about beginning to see things differently and beginning to move in a new direction.

‘In the military, there is a command, "About face!" that demonstrates what is meant by repentance. When the sergeant says, "About face!" soldiers turn and face in the opposite direction. Likewise, repentance involves turning and facing in the opposite direction.

‘John came preaching a "baptism of repentance for FORGIVENESS OF SINS" (3:3). The Greek word translated

"forgiveness" is aphasis (pronounced AF-eh-sis).

‘The meaning of aphasis goes beyond forgiveness. In the next chapter, Jesus will talk about being anointed, among other things, "to deliver (aphesis) those who are oppressed" (4:18)—so while aphasis means FORGIVENESS, it also means DELIVERANCE. It can also mean "TO SET SOMETHING FREE."

‘That's logical, isn't it! When we repent—when we follow a new and healthier vision—when we turn around and go in a new

direction—we are not only forgiven, but we are also set free.

‘In Lincoln, Nebraska, the local Klan Grand Dragon, a man named Larry Trapp, took it on himself to harass Michael Weisser, a cantor in the local Jewish synagogue. Trapp made threatening late-night phone calls. He sent hate mail. It went on and on.

‘But Weisser refused to take the bait. He neither ran and hid—nor tried to get revenge. Instead, he called Trapp, who was confined to a wheel chair, and offered to

take him to the grocery store. Trapp wouldn't answer the phone, but Weisser left voicemail messages offering to help. That, too, went on and on.

‘Finally the Klansman Trapp called the cantor Weisser and said, "What do you want? You're harassing me!"

‘But then Trapp called and said, "I want to get out of this, and I don't know how."

Weisser said, "I'll bring dinner and we'll talk." When they met, Trapp broke into tears. Their talk went well. Eventually,

Trapp moved in with the Weissers, and remained with them until his death.

‘When I read that story, I was struck by Trapp's comment, "I want to get out of this, and I don't know how." What a wonderful insight! Imagine what our lives would be like if we could have that kind of insight with regard to our sins—our prejudices—our enemies. "I want to get out of this, and I don't know how."

‘That's the kind of insight that John the Baptist was bringing to people. Our text says that he came "preaching the baptism of

repentance for the FORGIVENESS of sins" (3:3). We could legitimately translate that as he came "preaching the baptism of repentance for the DELIVERANCE from sins"—or he came "preaching the baptism of repentance to SET PEOPLE FREE from their sins"

‘With regard to that story, let me ask this question: Who benefited most when Jewish Weisser and Klansman Trapp finally worked their past the gulf that separated them?’

- ‘TRAPP, the one forgiven, obviously benefited, because he finally got the monkey off his back.
- ‘But WEISSER, the one who forgave, also benefited by refusing to take the bait—by refusing to answer hate with hate—by reaching out—by caring.
- ‘Both men benefited by losing an enemy and gaining a friend.

‘That's what John the Baptist was offering when he preached a baptism of repentance

for the forgiveness of sin. He was helping people to get the monkeys off their backs. He was helping them to drop their load of guilt. He was making it possible for them to stand up straight and walk into a guilt-free future.

‘Later, Jesus did the same—came preaching repentance and forgiveness. John first. Jesus second.

‘Now it's our turn.

- ‘First Christ calls us to repent and to receive forgiveness. That's hard. We find it difficult to believe that anyone can forgive us—especially God—but he can and will.
- ‘Second, Christ calls us to forgive those who have sinned against us. When we forgive others, we set them free—but most of all we set ourselves free. But that's hard too. We need God's help to **RECEIVE** forgiveness—and we need God's grace to **GIVE** forgiveness.
- ‘Finally, Christ calls us to proclaim two things: Repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness without repentance is like pouring forgiveness into a bucket that has a hole in the bottom. The bucket never gets full. But our repentance plugs the hole and makes it possible for God to fill us to the brim with forgiveness.

‘Charles Schulz, who penned the Peanuts cartoons, got lots of things right. In one of his cartoon strips, Lucy said:

“Now, Charlie Brown, you must realize that you are going to reap what you sow.

What you put into life is what you get out of life.

‘That's it! No more! No less!’

‘In response, Charlie Brown shook his head and said, "I'd kinda like a little bit more of a margin for error.”

‘When John preached a "baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins," he was telling us that God is clearly on the side of a great big margin for error. Embrace that. First, RECEIVE forgiveness. Then GIVE forgiveness.

‘It has been pointed out that the opposite of sin is faith, not virtue. Hopefully, if we are truly faithful we will be living virtuous lives, but we can fool ourselves into thinking what good Christians we are by how virtuous is our life. Focusing on virtuousness can render us insensitive to the needs of others, and thus virtuousness in itself can make us unloving.’

Richard Donovan, Sermon Writer

Rev. Philip McLarty wrote:

‘Remember the old highways of the past ... the steep hills, the hairpin turns, the dips and the bumps that could just about take the rear

end out of your car? Well, the highway Isaiah envisions is like an Interstate highway on which God, the king of all creation, will make his triumphal entry. It's a highway in which there's nothing to get in his way, nothing to slow him down, nothing to hinder his safe arrival.

'It's a metaphor, of course. It has to do with devoting ourselves to God so completely that we're willing to go all out to give him a royal welcome. And the Good News is, in the very process of preparing for God's coming, he welcomes us into his kingdom.

‘Are you familiar with the little fable called, The King’s Highway? It has to do with an elderly king who had no heir, no one to give his inheritance to. So, one night he sent his servants out to place a pile of rubble on the road leading to his castle. The next day he sent word that he was in search for a successor to the throne, and that whoever best traveled his road would be the next king.

‘Wannabe kings came from far and near. When they got to the pile of rubble, they grumbled and complained, but somehow

they managed to get around it. All the while, the king watched from the castle.

Now, it just so happened that there was a young shepherd boy named Michael who also aspired to be king. His friends just scoffed when he told them. “The king will never pick you,” they said, “Why, you’re nothing but a peasant.” But Michael would not be discouraged and so, he headed out to see the king. But when he got to the pile of rubble he stopped to clear the stones out of the way. To his surprise, when he got to the bottom of the pile, there was a beautiful gold ring with the king’s royal crest. Michael

stuck it in his pocket and rushed to the castle.

“I’m sorry it is so late,” Michael whispered as he knelt before the king. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out the ring for the king to see. “I found this on the road,” he said, “I’m sure it must belong to you.”

‘The king examined the ring carefully. “This ring is not mine,” he announced.

““But it must be yours,” Michael said, “It bears your crest.”

“Indeed it does,” said the king, “but it is not mine. It belongs to the one who will be seated on my throne.” Then giving the ring back to Michael, he said, “It now belongs to you. I proclaimed that he who best traveled the highway would become the new king. By clearing the road so that all may travel safely, you showed that it is not fine clothing, fancy horses, or even great wealth that make a king. True greatness comes through serving others.”

‘Brothers and sisters, the Lord is coming.
Let’s get busy while there’s still time to
prepare a highway fit for a king.’

<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/luke-31-6-a-highway-fit-for-a-king-mclarty/>

By The Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger:

‘You are familiar with Thoreau’s aphorism that “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” You may even believe it. ‘Tis true that for far too many, day fades into night then into day again with no real joy, no excitement, no exhilaration. Existence is BLAH...if even that good. Boring.

‘Unfortunately, things are not that simple. In fact, just the opposite is true. Yes, there ARE boring, blah times in our lives – those may even make up the major portion of our lives – but what define us are those times that are anything BUT boring. The SHOCKS! And they happen to all of us. They might come on a global scale – September 11th or December 7th; do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you heard? How about when President Kennedy was shot? Do you remember? Probably.

‘Other shocks are not so cosmic, but they are large nonetheless. How about the families of Christopher Santora and José Guadalupé, two firefighters from New York’s Engine Company 54 who lost their lives at the World Trade Center? This week they learned that Christopher’s body was buried in an October 1st funeral service for José – a bizarre and complicated case of mistaken identity. Shock!

‘Shocks DO come to all of us. And they change us. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. In many cases, the direction of the change is very much in our own hands.’

<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/luke-31-6-one-shock-after-another-leininger/>

Advent is the season for repentance and self-examination in the light of God's demands on us. It is a time when we consider where and how we have gone wrong, and then to turn back to God. Advent is a time to get ready, a time to prepare for God's coming again. We need to be ready now, not tomorrow or next week or next year. Now is the time of God's favor; now is the time when God looks for those who truly believe. Advent joy comes when our ego-barriers are broken, when we

feel for others rather than for ourselves. We need to keep Jesus Christ in focus and live as he lived, simply and with love for one another, even love for our enemies. How many can really say they truly love their enemies? This is exactly how Satan can get a foothold in us, through our hatred of our enemies. Hate casts out love. To be Christ to our neighbors is to behave as Christ would behave.

The Peanuts cartoon character Linus said to Charlie Brown, “You’re the only person in the world, Charlie Brown, who can take a wonderful thing like Christmas and turn it into a problem.” But Linus was wrong, it is

the world which takes a wonderful thing like Christmas and turns it into a problem. The issue for us Christians is how can we turn Christmas back into a wonderful thing? During Christmas we blow our household budgets, we lose our tempers, we jam our calendars full of things without meaning, having no time for soul-searching. But John the Baptist tells us to “prepare the way of the Lord.” Soul-searching is one way we can prepare ourselves for the Lord’s coming.

It has been estimated that the average American will spend an average of \$830 on Christmas gifts this year, up \$720 from last year, and the highest amount since 2007, the

year before the Great Recession of 2008. Often this is far more than the average Christian allocates for their entire pledge to the church. Do we have our priorities straight? Preparing the way of the Lord requires elbow grease and flushed faces, one commentator noted. Where have we put ourselves out as loving examples for others? How have we shared in God's grace by our offerings, by our relationships, by our good works?

We live between two days. We live between the day we hear the gospel and the day of Jesus' return. We need to arrive at

the latter day, the day of Jesus' return, and we need to arrive with no fear of judgment.

Americans are planning on celebrating Christmas like it's 2007.

A November survey by Gallup found that US adults are planning on spending about \$830 on average on Christmas gifts this year.

That's a huge jump from last year's \$720 average.

Notably, American consumers haven't suggested a number that high since November 2007, when they were planning on spending \$866 on average.

Sadly, our incomes simply do not justify this kind of extravagance. As Zero Hedge has pointed out, household incomes "actually peaked at least 15 years ago [in the Year 2000] in 81% of U.S. counties."

So why can't we adjust our lifestyles to match?

Why must we always have more?

Perhaps you feel you are in a wilderness today, far from God. But note in our gospel lesson for today, God's spoke to John the Baptist in the wilderness. God did not speak to the Roman emperor; God did not speak to the area governor. Instead God spoke to the poor outcast John the Baptist while he was in the wilderness. So, if you feel you yourself are in the wilderness, be ready to hear God speak. God seems to like wildernesses because God has more of our undivided attention in the wilderness. In fact, God may have put us in the wilderness in order for us to be able to hear God's voice

above all other voices. We the unprepared have to get ready. The salvation of God is at stake.

May we hear and heed God's call to us this Advent season.

<http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2015-11-25/triumph-materialism-average-american-will-spend-830-dollars-christmas-2015>

<Submitted by Michael Snyder via "The Economic Collapse blog">

Has there ever been a major holiday more focused on materialism than the

modern American Christmas? This year, Americans are planning to spend an average of 830 dollars on Christmas gifts, which represents a jump of 110 dollars over the average of 720 dollars last year. But have our incomes gone up accordingly? Of course not.

In fact, real median household income in the United States has been experiencing a steady long-term decline. So in order to fund all of our Christmas spending, we have got to go into even more debt.

We love to pull out our credit cards and spend money that we do not have on lots of cheap, useless stuff made on the other side of the world by workers making slave labor wages. We do the same thing year after year, and most of us have grown accustomed to the endless cycle of growing debt.

In fact, one Pew survey found that approximately 70 percent of all Americans believe that “debt is a necessity in their lives”. But then we have to work our fingers to the bone to try to make the payments on all of that debt, not realizing that debt systematically impoverishes us. It

may be hard to believe, but if you have a single dollar in your pocket and no debt, you have a greater net worth than 25 percent of all Americans. I know that sounds crazy, but it is true.

Overall, when you add up all forms of debt (consumer, business, local government, state government and federal government), Americans are more than 60 trillion dollars in debt.

Let that sink in for a bit.

40 years ago, that number was sitting at about 3 trillion dollars.

We have been on the greatest debt binge in the history of the world. Even though we were “the wealthiest, most prosperous nation on the entire planet”, we always had to have more. We just kept on borrowing and borrowing and borrowing from the future until we completely destroyed it.

And we still haven't learned anything.

Instead, this Christmas season we will be partying like it's 2007...

Americans should be having smaller Christmases instead of bigger ones, but that doesn't fit the image of who we still think that we are.

Recently, someone published an article entitled "Goodbye Middle Class: 51 Percent Of All American Workers Make Less Than 30,000 Dollars A Year" that was shared more than 44,000 times on Facebook. In that article was included brand new figures that were just released by the Social Security Administration. As you can see, the quality of our jobs is not great...

-38 percent of all American workers made less than \$20,000 last year.

-51 percent of all American workers made less than \$30,000 last year.

-62 percent of all American workers made less than \$40,000 last year.

-71 percent of all American workers made less than \$50,000 last year.

Without a doubt, most American families should not be spending hundreds of dollars a year on Christmas gifts.

At these income levels, most American families are just barely surviving.

But once again this year, millions upon millions of Americans will flock to the malls and big box stores in a desperate attempt to make themselves happy.

Sadly, those efforts will be in vain. In fact, in a previous article I highlighted the fact

that Christmas is the unhappiest season of the year. The suicide rate spikes to the highest level of the year during “the holidays”, and 45 percent of all Americans report that they dread the Christmas season. The following is an excerpt from a Psychology Today article...

‘We are told that Christmas, for Christians, should be the happiest time of year, an opportunity to be joyful and grateful with family, friends and colleagues. Yet, according to the National Institute of Health, Christmas is the time of year that people experience the highest incidence of depression. Hospitals and police forces

report the highest incidences of suicide and attempted suicide. Psychiatrists, psychologists and other mental health professionals report a significant increase in patients complaining about depression. One North American survey reported that 45% of respondents dreaded the festive season.

In recent years, an increasing number of Americans have given up the tradition of Christmas gifts entirely, and many of them seem quite happy to have done so.'

Of course most people are still quite satisfied with the status quo, and there are many that will get very angry with you if

you dare to suggest that the way that Americans celebrate Christmas has gotten way out of hand.

But shouldn't it alarm us that for most Americans the biggest holiday of the year is all about the "stuff" they are going to buy, the "stuff" they are going to give and the "stuff" they are going to get?

As a society, we are obsessed with things, but those things are never going to make us happy.

But you won't hear this reported on the mainstream news, will you?

They want us to think that happy days are here again.

The following chart comes from the Federal Reserve, and it shows that real median household income in the United States has been trending down since 1999...from about \$58,000 in 1999 to about \$53,700 in 2014.

<http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2015-11-25/triumph-materialism-average-american-will-spend-830-dollars-christmas-2015>



Surely God knew what God was trying to say through John the Baptist in the year 26 AD or so. God's Son was about to spring onto the world scene again, now as a fully-grown adult. It was important that his way be made as smooth and as straight as possible, because his days would be fiercely numbered. Now Jesus is to come to us again, in the clouds, and it is our time that is fiercely limited. How will we be part of the preparation for his second coming? Will we have spread the gospel of salvation far and wide enough? Will each of our neighbors

be brought into a decision about coming into God's Son's fold? Will our lives count as being those Christ would have us live?

Preparation for the return of Christ requires repentance, in the Greek, "metanoia", that means, "changing one's mind". We need to have a new perspective on how our Christian lives affect others, whether we travel above or below their heads going sixty miles an hour in the South Bronx or on Route 280 in East Orange or elsewhere in this the richest land in the world. How disparate are the lives of those living in Newark, and Camden, and Elizabeth from those living in Somerset or

Morris or Hunterdon Counties, some of the wealthiest counties in the United States?

And how can we make a difference in gaining relief for others who are neglected or mistreated? I am sure the problems are just as real in Oregon or Oklahoma or Omaha, Nebraska. The distance between the haves and the have-nots increases by the week. What judgment will this bring on us when the Lord comes again? Is this only Biblical fiction, or does it really, really matter?

Paris, France, uses one and a half tons of a perfume called “Madeline” per month to suppress the odors of its subway system

(from “Dynamic Preaching”). And I am sure someone is trying to buy something like “Madeline” perfume to cover up the odors from the Julia Street garbage transfer station that takes in 1,600 tons of New York City and New Jersey garbage each and every day, right in the back yards of hundreds of lower income minority families here in Elizabeth, as well as a comparable amount in similar neighborhoods in Newark. What has driven us to such extremes? Why do people’s lives and livelihoods no longer matter? And I have just this week heard similar stories from Ohio and Colorado. Where else are

travesties occurring among the least able to defend themselves?

I for one think churches have a major role to play in getting our society to repent of its insensitivities to the cares and concerns of many downtrodden and disenfranchised people. We as a nation and as a world have ignored the cries of the poor and oppressed, even the ones right under our noses, and feet.

Advent begins with repentance. Advent continues with the remembrance of things we have either done or left undone. And finally, Advent should culminate in renewal of our vows as Christians to work on behalf

of the last, the least, and the lowly. Jesus came to save us. We need to be the saving agents for others. Let us go forth from here and serve the Lord in justice, in righteousness, and in truth. The time to wake up and hear the cry of the prophet in the wilderness is again upon us. Will we respect his call? And will we respect, honor, and serve his Lord, our Savior?

John the Baptist was not one of those whom one would think the “word of God” would ever come to. He was a hermit-sort, with a somewhat well-known Jewish priest father who served occasionally at the great

Jerusalem Temple. John was perhaps a typical PK, a “preacher’s kid”. He had become rather anti-social, living out in the desert and roughing it--what once would have been termed, “hippie like”, or one of the “beat generation”. And then all of a sudden he began this intense interaction with people from “civilization”, calling them to repentance for their sins, giving practical advice to soldiers and others on how to behave ethically, and castigating those temple authorities from Jerusalem that had sought him out for his “baptism of repentance” without really being ready to repent.

John the Baptizer was characterized as being the striking voice in the wilderness prophesied by the prophet Isaiah in about the fourth century BC. The Lord God was on his way down to earth and God's way was to be made straight and smooth. John's declaration was ominous and fetched people from far and wide to come to his little dirt pulpits all around and beside the Jordan River. The chord John struck in people perhaps for the first time in their lives made them aware of the demands of their holy God.

Christmas is in the vogue in Japan although Christians are a vast minority

there, only two or three percent at most.

One Japanese Christmas shopper was asked if she knew the meaning of Christmas.

Laughing, she responded, “I don’t know. Is that the day that Jesus died?” Maybe she got it more right than we would like to think.

Today’s message is about repenting for our sins and of how God will level the playing field, raising all valleys to level, and lowering all mountains to the same plain. It is the plan upon which America’s Interstate Highways are constructed, and also most of the major motorways of all other developed

countries. The concept of level roadways was also common practice in the days of the Pharaohs and kings, who in preparation to make a state visit in some far away part of their empire or realm would first send out road crews to fill in the valleys and level the mountains and hills so the chariots of the king or pharaoh would have safe and smooth passage through all sorts of terrain, with limited opportunities for ambush attack from local brigands. And the King's Highway was also often a major trade route. Witness in Israel the King's Highway that runs from the border of modern-day Egypt to the Arabian Sea and then on into Syria. The

ancient King's Highway was probably in existence as early as 1300 BC, 300 years before King David, and parts are still able to be used today; it began in Heliopolis, Egypt, and from there went eastward to Clysma (modern Suez), through the Mitla Pass and the Egyptian forts in the Sinai desert to Eilat and Aqaba on the inlet to the Sea of Arabia. From there the Highway turned northward through the Arabah, the Great Rift Valley to the Dead Sea, past Petra, through Moab, past Damascus, and ending at Resafa on the upper Euphrates River in ancient, and modern, Syria.

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King%27s_Highway_\(ancient\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King%27s_Highway_(ancient))

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The impressive King's Highway would be more comparable in the Americas to a yet mostly non-existent continuous highway say from Mexico City up to Toronto, or Juno, Alaska, to understand its strategic importance to many ancient Middle Eastern nations. Many of the wars of the Israelites against the kingdoms of the trans-Jordanian highlands during the period of the Kingdom of Israel (and its sister-kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah) under Kings David and Solomon and following probably were

fought at least partly over control of the King's Highway.

So, the ancient ears to John the Baptist's cry would likely immediately understand the portent, the gist, of what John was proclaiming. God is on the way and with smooth traveling God will be here in no time! The signal arm is down, the bells are ringing, the red lights are flashing, and the train is on its way, inexorably, with unstoppable force and speed much like the modern 250 mile an hour maglev train from near Shanghai, China, to its airport. But instead of being worried about being hit by the wrath of God, John says, "all flesh shall

see the salvation of God.” But of course, seeing is not necessarily believing!

So today we are presented again with an opportunity to turn our lives back towards God, whom we may have been ignoring for much of our lives, and maybe even during these preceding weeks. How has God rated on our scale of 1 to 10? Is God a 6 or a 3 or a 1? Do we give God our tithe, our ten percent at least? Do we rank God closer to our monthly mortgage payments or down with our electric and water bills, or even below that? Do we spend a hundred or ten minutes with God each week, or each day,

or do we simply ignore the Lord most days,
and even skip Sunday services?

Do we make God's pathway into our
lives straight, or do we gerrymander the
road a bit here and there?

So today we are faced with the prospect
of being honest with our God. We will not
likely admit our thoughts to anyone else, but
God will hear our heart and surely God
already knows our ways.

Rev. J. Clemens quotes Theresa of Avila,
“God's messengers come through the
conversations of good people, or from
sermons, or through the reading of good
books; and there are many other ways . . . in

which God calls. Or [God's messengers] come through sicknesses and trials, or by means of truths which God teaches us at times when we are engaged in prayer; however feeble such prayers may be, God values them highly.'

“Not satisfied with boxing up promise [and] fulfillment passages such as these and mothballing them on the shelf of irrelevant history, Teresa of Avila takes those same passages and moves forward into a new time and place. And that's where the lessons of Advent can address us: what messages has God been sending to you lately? How have

you been challenged to grow? Who has brought you hope?”

Rev. Clemens continues, “Not long ago, a close friend recalled her mother’s life. ‘My mother worked her entire life in the same job. She knew what the job entailed and developed the skills and knowledge to accomplish her tasks. But she never changed.’ I thought that harsh and unloving, Rev. Clemens said, so I asked her to explain. ‘Well, my mother never developed any interests, hobbies, never took a class, never enjoyed a symphony concert or attended the theatre. She just put in her 9-5 over a life time and went home and watched TV.’

“We need messengers and messages to confront us and to push us to new places of growth,” Rev. Clemens concludes.

Maybe God has some glorious purpose for your life. Can you hear it? Does it excite you? Or will you ignore God’s promptings and go along with your 9 to 5 or 8 to 6 job, go home and plop down on the easy chair to watch TV every night?

Or is God calling you to come up higher to hear God’s plan for the rest of your life?

I believe God has a lot to say to each of us here today. God does have needs that only we can fulfill. Maybe we are to be

trustworthy greeters, ushers, readers. And then again, maybe we are to go out as missionaries to the far flung reaches of the earth--or maybe something in between.

I rather think God is not keeping silent. When we all have repented, turned from our sins of self-deception and self-absorption and self-aggrandizement, we may just hear God motioning to us to come closer to God's lips, so we can hear God's whisper. It may not even be a sound, but only the mother of a sound, as when Elijah and John the Baptist heard God's voice in the wilderness. It may be in the brief quietness

between the offertory sentence and the offertory hymn, or maybe God already spoke to you before the worship began. God can speak quickly or slowly, but always to the point, and amazingly clearly if we only are willing to listen.

Give your life to God. It's all you have, but you will be rewarded handsomely, both now and in eternity. Amen.

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There's an old joke in which one of the Cardinals tells the Pope, "Your holiness, I have good news and bad news." The Pope says, "What is it, my son?" The Cardinal replies, "The good news is the Lord has

come, and he's calling you on the phone!"

The Pope exclaims, "Why, that's wonderful! What could be the bad news in that?" The Cardinal says, "He's calling collect from Salt Lake City."

John the Baptist tried to make the way for Jesus Christ straight so the Messiah's message could go out to all people. Yet even in the end John the Baptist was a bit uncertain Jesus was the one he was seeking. So, we cannot be so critical of the religion of Islam.

Christ indeed loves the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Hindu, and even the atheist who does not even believe in God.

By our love for all of God's created humans can we possible one day save at least a few to be able to find the true God in their heart through their faith in the only one person who defeated death finally and completely.

Let us pray that our faith will remain strong even in the face of great adversity and perhaps through great adversities which may lie ahead for us. Jesus assured us that he will be with us always even to the end of the age, Matthew 28.20. Believe in Him and we will be saved now and eternally.

Amen.

Description:

What we say and what we do do not always agree, if ever, but the divergence between the Christian way and the way of Christians seems sometimes far apart. Other faiths call us to question, as do those with no faith.

How can we set some examples for others about what is the importance of Christmas?

Tags:

Christmas, John, Baptist, wilderness,
highway, God, Jesus, Christ, Quran,
Muslim, faith, Adam, Eve, believe,
cardinals, Pope, Advent, repentance, gifts,
giving, debt, trillion, king, pharaoh,
Japanese, suicide, Chile, Syria, Pakistan,
taxi, crucifixion, Charlie Brown, consumers,
middle class, rich, highway, Egypt,
repentance, king, kingdom, eternally