

During Advent and Christmastime, I feel like I'm reminded of memories every day. Happy memories of friends, family, and traditions, going back as far as I can remember. For me, music is what brings all the best memories to mind. Everyone has their favorite Christmas songs, carols, or hymns – and so many of my favorite Advent and Christmas memories are connected to music.

Growing up, my family went to see the Nutcracker ballet every year, so Tchaikovsky's music reminds me of this family tradition. In high school, my marching band played *Carol of the Bells* one year – which was beautiful, but really hard to march to! In college, at the annual Christmas choir concert, the choir would always process while singing *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. During our college's Christmas band concert, we would always play *Sleigh Ride*, and the wife of our college president would play the slapstick.

But, for me, the Christmas season isn't complete until I hear the little children from the Charlie Brown Christmas soundtrack singing *Christmastime Is Here*. Every year, I feel like I'm waiting in eager anticipation to hear this song on the radio for the first time. I know that we are all waiting in eager anticipation at this time of year – especially here, in the church. As Christians, Advent has much more meaning than just food, presents, and parties with friends or coworkers. Of course, we still give gifts and decorate the Christmas tree – still, there is so much more to Advent than just that! Advent is a season of emotion, memory, and preparation. Each Sunday, we mark out our preparation with candles and the ideas of hope, peace, joy, and love. Though these each have a candle of their own, the Advent season blends these ideas together into eager anticipation.

Each of these four ideas has special meaning to me, but the one I experience the most during this holy season is peace. I don't know if it's because of the beautiful music, the twinkling lights, or the happy memories; I just know I feel a sense of peace during Advent, even as we all busily prepare throughout the season for the coming of the Christ-child.

When I think about the idea of peace, or preparing the way of peace, I have to pause for a minute. What does this kind of preparation look like? Many of us know how to prepare for the festivities, but **what does preparing the way of peace look like? What does peace mean for us?**

John the Baptist knew all about preparing the way. It was practically his job description. He was part of a rich history of prophets from the Jewish Scriptures. John seems kinda crazy and scary to us: he lives in the wilderness, eats bugs and honey, and wears camel's hair. No, thank you! But, for the Jewish people who came to hear John and follow the way that he was preparing, he was just right. John modeled himself after Elijah, one of the great prophets of the Jewish Scriptures. So, not only was John exciting and interesting, he would've made a lot of sense for the Jews that came to him and the early Jewish Christians who would hear about him.

When we think about these early Jewish Christians, the strange first verse of Mark's gospel makes a bit more sense. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It's odd – there isn't a verb in the opening sentence. It's more like the title of a book. Even though there's no verb, there's a lot going on. For the earliest Christians, the prophets of Israel were actually "the beginning" of the good news. These prophets were very important, like Isaiah, Malachi, and Elijah, who are all referenced in this passage. The prophets have a central role in preparing for the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, it makes sense that John the Baptist looks a lot like a famous Jewish prophet.

Here, we also see the phrase "good news." Or, we could say, "the gospel." The word "gospel" has a lot of meaning behind it. It was originally linked to a victory in an ancient empire. It's major news, and it's meant to create a response. The gospel isn't just a noun – *the* good news ... it's also a verb – to *proclaim* the good news. So, John is passionate about the good news and proclaiming it.

But, what is the good news John is proclaiming? How is it related to the way that he's preparing?

John proclaims the good news of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The idea of repentance makes me squirm a bit, to be honest. But, it's right there in the text. John the baptizer called the people of Israel to repent, and they came to him in droves.

Repent is a really interesting word. When I looked it up, the first part of the definition said, "to feel sorry or contrite for past conduct; to regret a past action or attitude."¹ This is about what I expected to find; repentance as an action focused on the past. Remorse, apology, lament. These can be meaningful and good - though they can leave us constantly stuck in the past, or always trying to justify ourselves somehow.

On the other hand, the second part of the definition of "repent" can be really helpful. Repentance *also* involves "changing one's life for the better." In John's message, there's an emphasis on change, reform, and new life. John isn't just calling for repentance about the past – he calls for change toward a new future. This is both the good news that John is proclaiming, and the way that he's preparing.

I think this sense of preparation, change, and abundant life is crucial to this story, and even more crucial in the context of Advent. They're central to what I believe peace is all about.

The true peace of God in Christ isn't the same thing as the peace we typically talk about today. Too often, peace gets watered down and even turned into something destructive. It might mean keeping the peace, maybe by lying or acting without integrity. Peace can mean sweeping things under the rug. It can be used to hide some major issues or continue practices of injustice. Or, sometimes, when we hope for peace, we're really hoping that we just don't have war. This isn't the peace I want to preach today, or any day, and I don't think it was the peace of Christ that John was pointing us toward.

¹ Merriam Webster

Instead, the peace of God is an amazing thing. I mentioned that Isaiah is referenced in today's passage. Isaiah 40 says:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."²

This beautiful passage of Scripture describes God's best intention for this world. It's also based on a practice from Isaiah's time. When a king or ruler would go somewhere that didn't already have roads, workers would go in advance and create a road. So, the uneven ground was made level, and rough places made plain. Isaiah does a great bit of reinterpretation on this practice involving kings, in order to teach us about the coming of God.

John the Baptist was working in the same tradition as Isaiah: seeking to prepare the way for the coming of God. John does this by proclaiming repentance through baptism. The repentance that John preaches is both putting aside old ways of being and creating new life. This repentance isn't just turning away from something, but turning toward something else. Isaiah speaks about the leveling and equalizing power of God -- John is working toward bringing about this new way of life for as many people as possible. For John, the coming life and ministry of Jesus Christ demands nothing less.

Here at Calvary, we are in the midst of the Advent season. Like John, we are preparing the way. We're anticipating the coming of the Christ-child -- so much so, that we're celebrating the ways that this child leads us all. We light the candles of the Advent wreath -- and think carefully about ideas of hope, peace, joy, and love. We've made other preparations, too: not just over the past couple of weeks, but also throughout our entire lives together as this church community.

Day in and day out, we live our lives in many ways that prepare the way for God. We do big things and small things alike. We make meals for each other, visit each other when we're sick, and form the kinds of friendships that last a lifetime. We host families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network, help build Habitat homes, and walk to end hunger. We support our ministers and missionaries. We pray, study, and serve. We support people throughout all ages and phases of life.

We welcome every single person that comes through our doors with love, compassion, and grace as a beloved child of God. This is who we are here at Calvary.

² Isaiah 40:3-6

Many others have led us into this way of being – we've been shown the way by prophets and saints that have gone before us, and I thank God for each and every one of them.

This is the true spirit of Advent: preparing the way of peace. However, we can't stop here, and we can't stop now. Like John the Baptist taught us, we must always continue to prepare the way for the one who is to come. The peace of Christ is quite a mission – one that forms new life, creative change, and God's true peace for all. It's challenging, messy, and hard – and I believe it's absolutely necessary. It's part of our calling as Christians.

Here at Calvary, I believe that we do an amazing job of preparing the way of peace. In some ways, the way has already been prepared – John and Jesus have come before us, and so have many other amazing saints of this church and of our faith. In this Advent season, throughout the whole year, and all through our lives as children of God, we are called to continue the work of preparing the way of peace. Not a peace that's easy or convenient, but the true peace of God: the one we learned from Jesus Christ.

There are always new horizons ahead of us. We can learn from where we've been, and remember those that have led us here - while we keep moving into the future together. John the Baptist was right: we must keep changing for the better, and keep living out new ways to create abundant life for all.

Just as John prepared the way for Jesus, and as Advent prepares the way for Christmas, we must always prepare the way of peace.

Amen.