

WHAT HALLMARK WON'T TELL YOU

Mark 1:1-8

December 7, 2008

(SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT)

**Wild and lone the prophet's voice
echoes through the desert still,
calling us to make a choice,
bidding us to do God's will:
Turn from sin and be baptized;
cleanse your heart and mind and soul.
Quitting all the sin you prized,
yield your life to God's control.**

Are you ready for Christmas? There's still a lot to do isn't there? Presents to buy. And cards to send. And trees and decorations. And cookies to bake and deliver. And office parties to attend. And family get-togethers, and school concerts. Church dinners, children's programs, Christmas pageants and shopping and shopping and more shopping ... And all those presents have to be wrapped. Somebody, I don't recall who, but somebody said the Christmas season can best be summed up by the words, "Peace on earth, good will to all ... batteries not included!"

There's so *much* to do this time of year. So many things ... just to get ready for Christmas and all the stuff that comes *before* it. And then John the Baptist comes along with his locust-breath and camel's hair like some street corner evangelist, and says "Are you ready? Are you sure?" And he isn't talking about December twenty-fifth. He's talking about God. "Are you ready to meet your maker? Do you know where you stand? How is it with your soul?" Well, that last

bit was from John Wesley -- John the Methodist, we like to call him. But the message was the same. Jesus is coming. The Word-made-flesh.

John is the voice crying in the wilderness, **“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley will be lifted up, every mountain brought low. The rough roads will be smoothed out. And the crooked straightened. And all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”** And that was John. John the Baptist. The Voice in the wilderness. The mouthpiece of God.

And you think, “It’s Christmas. ‘Tis the season to be jolly. Who invited John the Baptist? What’s he got to do with, *Peace on Earth, good will to all?* ✕ But ... there he is. Like some old-fashioned, bible-thumping, pulpit-pounding revival preacher saying, “The Lord is near. The Christ, the anointed one is coming. And you’d better be ready when he comes!”

But how do you do that? It’s hard enough just to get ready for Christmas. So how do you prepare for the coming of the Lord? How do we prepare the way for God to come among us? ✕

My cousin Laura knows a little something about this, I think. Laura is about thirty now (with red hair, of course). And she was married about six years ago. In December of 2002. And she and her mom had been planning that wedding for at least a hundred years. Which is quite a thing to do for a young woman in her twenties. But you know what I mean. They planned and decorated and saw about flowers and frosted branches (because it was December), and deep, rich-colored fabric for her attendants and the flower girls, and the

guest book girl, and the bird-seed basket girl, and the ring-bearer, and just about everybody she knew at the time.

And there were caterers to contact, and photographers, and musicians, and the preacher from Elkins and the preacher in Wayne. And on and on it went. Right down to the last salted peanut, they were prepared. And they were married in the church at Wayne, which you would not have recognized. Because she had turned it into something like a winter wonderland.

And the organ played. It was her grandma Gertrude (the same organist who played "*I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*" for the offertory one Sunday morning when I was a kid.) And the preachers came and stood in the preacher's spot. And the bridesmaids came forward, and the flower girls, and the ring bearer, and the bride. And the service began. A hundred years they had been planning this wedding... And it was over in ten minutes. Isn't that something?

Ah, but later (nearly two years later), my young cousin Laura, was preparing for something new, and wonderful, and a bit scary, I think. She was getting ready for the coming of her first child. A wee little baby. You know about that. They turned one of their bedrooms into a nursery. And they thought and they searched and they pondered, trying on names. And finally, if it was a girl, they decided, her name would be Mattie, after my mother. And if it was a boy, it would be Jackson. Jackson Ty.

So that was settled. They had a name and a nursery. But there was still so much to do to get ready for this little one who was coming, *ready or not*. There were diapers to be stockpiled, and car seats, and formula, and sleepers, and booties, and "*onesies*," and a

nursery monitor, and all the neat and newfangled gadgets babies come with these days. (Sort of.)

And Laura and Jeremy were ready. At least they thought they were ready. But there was a problem.... The baby came early. And there was something not quite right with one of his eyes. At first, they thought it was a tumor, a malignant tumor behind his eye. And then they thought, no, he has a cataract. That's what's causing the problem. So they did surgery in Cincinnati. And it wasn't a cataract, really. It's something else. A rare kind of thing. Only one in every sixty-thousand has this condition. And finally they were home. Full of joy and a little bit of fear, and a lot of love and care and gratitude.

And that's how you do it, I think. You prepare for the one who's coming by making room. And not just in your house, mind you, but in your heart and your life. You make ready for their coming [with all the special needs and special joys they bring] by turning your hearts toward them. So, Laura and Jeremy are made room in their hearts. And they've made room in their schedules. And in their lives. And it is demanding, at times. And it's exhilarating, and exciting, and exhausting. And it has turned their lives upside down. But nothing could be more fulfilling than having him in their lives. No greater joy. No deeper love.

Isn't that what John the Baptist said? He stood there like some old-fashioned, bible-waving, fire and brimstone evangelist. "The Lord is near!" he preached, to anyone who would hear it. "The Kingdom is at hand! Repent," he hammered. "Repent and be baptized!" ✠ The funny thing is that word *repent* means *change*. It means *turn*. Turn around, said John. Turn your whole life around. Get yourself turned upside down and inside out. Turn away from

living your life as if it's all about you. And turn toward the One who is coming. Make room in your life and in your heart for him.

But what if the One who comes isn't what we expected?

Before Patrick was born in Clarksburg, the women there at Christ Church had a shower. A baby shower, I mean. And the theme ... Did you know these things had themes? Well, I'm pretty sure the theme of the shower was ***Think Pink***. It *must* have been. Because the fellowship hall was all decked out with pink streamers and pink balloons. And the cake ... they always have cake at these things. The cake had pink icing with little pink flowers and lacy pink things all around it. And there were pink booties and pink forks and pink spoons and pink napkins. Even the punch in the punch bowl was pink. And that's how we knew for sure, beyond any doubt, that we were going to have another boy. And we were ready. The women at the church were caught completely off guard, mind you. But *we* were ready. And I have to tell you, Patrick hates pink. (Besides he's on the football team. And things could get ugly). Wouldn't wear pink to save his life. (Except for the shoelaces, of course, in his shoes.)

But that's how it happens.... And people in those days were ready, they thought. Everything wasn't pink for a girl, mind you. But they *were* ready for a king. A royal leader. Who would be exactly what they wanted. Someone to take back God's people and the land he had given them. Someone to free them from the heavy burdens Rome had placed on them. All the taxes, and all the restrictions, and all the shame, and oppression, and loss. A conquering hero, that's what they wanted.

They waited and waited for that day to come. For centuries they waited.... And then comes John, the Voice in the wilderness, right out

of the Book of Isaiah, the prophet. **“Prepare the way. Get everything ready.”** They were ready to put on their marching shoes and take up arms if need be. **“The Kingdom’s at hand!”** said John. And the people say **“Amen! Preach it, brother! Preach the word!”** And John says, **“Repent! Change! Turn your hearts round right!”**

It wasn’t what they expected to hear from a Messiah. It wasn’t even what they wanted. But, says John, he’s the One. He’s the One who will baptize you. Not with water, mind you, but with fire. He will bathe your heart and soul, not just the body. He’s the One who will cleanse within, said John. That’s why John turned to the leaders of the temple, the pillars of the church (the Pharisees and Sadducees) and told *them* to get ready, too. **Because being a descendant of Abraham, he said [in Matthew’s gospel] is neither here nor there. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, he said, it goes on the fire. And he said, “I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. But the real action comes next. God’s son will come. The Christ. The Anointed One. Compared to him, I’m nothing, really. He will ignite a fire *within* you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to do some house cleaning -- make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything in its proper place before God. Everything false in us he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”**

Repent. Come clean. Cut out the deadwood in your heart and your life.... These are things Hallmark won’t tell you. You won’t see such things on their Christmas cards. But if we were on John the Baptist’s Christmas card list, I have a feeling that’s what it would say. ***Turn around. Make a clean start. Get your house in order.***

And how do we do that? The same way Laura and Jeremy did for little Jackson Ty. We make room in our hearts for the One who comes, in whatever way he will come. That means turning away from sin, from anything and everything that keeps us from being who God wants us to be, and turning toward Jesus. Toward God-in-the-flesh. The One who came not to be served, but to serve. The One who came to bring justice to the little ones, and healing to the wounded ones, and bread to the hungry ones.

Turn toward the One who came to take up the cross for *our* wrongs and our sins. The One of whom the prophet said, **He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.** Because he is the One who can cut away the deadwood in our hearts, in our lives, and in our life together as the people of God. If we turn to him ... What does it say in the bible? **Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.** God will come and make his home in your heart, and there he will abide. The best way, the only way to make room in our lives for Jesus, is to open our hearts and say to him, "Come. Come into my heart. Make room in me. In my life. In my living. In every part of me. Straighten out what is crooked. Fill in the low places. Smooth out the rough places. And make me the person you would have me to be.

And the Good News is he always comes. He always comes near. And he always comes near when we make room in our hearts and in his church for his little ones. His beloved. Those who need a little healing, a little hope. He always comes when we prepare a way and open the door for them to come in.

But let me tell you a little story ... just to show you what I mean. A few years ago a man named Alex, Alex Dovaless, was drifting along in

a rickety boat with twenty-seven other Cubans. And a year later... Well, one of the newspapers in Miami said, "A year later he was an angel." For one year later, fourteen weary, exhausted, and penniless Cubans in a raft washed ashore at Key Largo. Fourteen people on an eighteen-foot raft. For four days they were huddled in on that raft with very little water and a few rusted cans filled with meat. And Alex Dovalles looked at them and he said, "I felt like I had just arrived here myself."

Alex was twenty-five years old. And he earned \$197 a week washing dishes. And this is what he did. He walked home and he went inside and gathered all the presents under his Christmas tree. And he gave the gifts -- each one containing a shirt or some other kind of clothing -- to those fourteen weary people who had just washed ashore. His roommate, Henry, said, "They were wet and cold. And Alex took off his shirt and gave it to them. He didn't give it a second thought," he said. "Cause it's just like he said. They have nothing."

You know what happened there? Alex turned. HE turned away from his own wants, his own needs. He turned away from the kind of living that says, "It's all about me," and he turned toward others and made room for them in his heart, in his world. And in making room for them, he made room for God, the Word-made-flesh.

That's what Advent is about, really. It's about turning. It's about making room within us and among us, so that the coming Christ might find in us both a welcome and a home.

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 cleanse your heart and mind and soul.
Quitting all the sin you prized,
 yield your life to God's control.**

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, OblSB

