

Nov 28 10 Advent 1 Mark 1:1-4

Night of the Father's Love

ARE YOU PREPARED?

There they were Thursday afternoon following Thanksgiving dinner passing around the ads that came in the morning paper looking to see where the bargains were. Then our granddaughter Heather said to the group, "We need to develop a plan for tomorrow's shopping spree." They all agreed. After finding which stores they wanted to get to first, what time they would get there, they devised a plan. One would go get in line once in the store, the other would do the shopping quickly and they would meet at the register. The other two would do the same at the other store. In fact, there were not only 4 of them but Karen's friend joined them in their search to be prepared to meet and defeat the wasted time it takes to shop on Black Friday. 10 hours later, home they came, packages in hand, most of the things they wanted they got. The plan worked! By being prepared they were able to get in and out of stores a little more efficiently than last year. In the paper the other day the stores were talking about being prepared for this holiday season by hiring new help earlier than usual, ordering more merchandise and special buys, especially for Black Friday. Best Buy was prepared to meet its onslaught for big ticket sales items by giving out tickets to those first in line. Didn't hear of any problems around the

nation this year of someone being trampled while trying to get in the stores. They must have all been prepared.

I never became a Boy Scout but I know we have a few in this church. We have at least two Eagle Scouts in Will and Craig Ripka, and I know their dad Tom is very active in scouting. Not sure who else is a Cub Scout or Boy Scout but they have a great motto, “Always Be Prepared.” Just think of people who carry umbrellas to be prepared in case a rain shower pops up. Golfers like me and Harry not only carry umbrellas but also have rain gear stuffed in our bag just in case a little rain falls. Our roofers have been prepared as well as many of them wore a harness connected to protect them in case they slip. We have been told to get our cars tuned up, place a survival kit in the trunk just in case you get caught in a snow storm. You got to be prepared. With all the nice days we have had the past week I bet many people have been preparing their homes with lights and decorations. If you look around at our church and heard the choir this morning we too as a church are preparing to celebrate Christmas by preparing to remember the wonderful gift that God gave to us, His Son.

“Always be prepared” is a great motto. Even the Apostle Peter said something about this in a different context. He said, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

This morning begins the season of Advent. The season of love, peace and hope, of preparing, waiting, coming and seeking. Every year at this time we begin to prepare our homes and communities for Christmas. For 4 weeks there is decorating, baking, parties, gift buying, kids programs at school all in preparation for one day, Christmas. The TV will be flooded with the old Christmas movies. Many will watch Mr. Scrooge's transformation from "Bah Humbug" to "Praise the Lord" as he turns from a crotchety old man who cares for no one, to a man who has an open heart, an open mind, and an open door. And each Advent season there is joy as people become more generous. Salvation Army bell ringers can be found at many stores hoping to collect money so others less fortunate can have a present, or even a meal or help of some sorts throughout the year. Many churches have Christmas mission for kids. We do the shoebox ministry sending just a little box to some child across the ocean who will know someone over here cares. Or our Angel Tree kids who come from troubled homes find the love of Jesus through your giving them a gift or two. Don't forget to get your child.

Prepare! That's the call we heard this morning from our messenger coming out of the wilderness. "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight a highway for our God.*" comes the call from Mark as he quotes Isaiah 40:3. Not sure if you have noticed in reading Mark's Gospel it doesn't deal with the birth of Jesus, but begins

with the birth of his ministry. John came out of the wilderness looking like, well, looking like some guy who came out of the dessert and hadn't seen a bar of soap or water for many years. Hair long and straggly. Beard long, eyes dark looking and sunken. He looks at all the people as he walks along saying "*Prepare the way of the Lord. Repent; seek forgiveness for your sins before it's too late.*"

A prophet coming at just the right time to tell the people that one is coming who he is not worthy to tie the ties on his sandals. Prepare the way for the coming of the one who was called to lead God's people to the promise land. Prepare for his coming!

John the Baptist is coming with a message that was proclaimed many years ago by the prophet Isaiah. Same message, different times, but as we know the people's behavior was almost the same. Rebellion would be one word to use. Rebellion not against the king of the Jews, but against God. The people felt lost, without hope. God in all his splendor raises up Isaiah to bring them the good news that one day a deliver would come, one that will set them free, one that they can trust. So don't give up hope, but prepare themselves for his coming.

We know this...they didn't get to see that prophecy fulfilled. But we have. We have because God sent us his Son born in a manger to a carpenter and a young

virgin teenage girl, surrounded by animals, in a stable, or a barn because there was no room for them in any inn.

**Was the world prepared for his coming?** Not really. Were they looking for the Messiah to come? Kind of. Every priest, every Pharisee, every Sadducee, every Jew on the street was waiting his coming. They heard it in church every week. The scriptures were full of his coming. But were they seeking his coming or looking for it to happen soon? Some were. Maybe the poor and neglected. Maybe some of the religious leaders. But not all. It was like our world today. Not every church is preparing its people for that great event, the trumpet call from the angels and the descending of Christ to come take his people home. Are you prepared for that coming? I wonder. Am I? I believe I am. So back they might have been praying for it to happen, but some perhaps felt it would not happen in their life time. Hopeful, yes. Longing? Yes! Waiting? Yes! Prepared? Well on some days. They pictured one coming on a white horse from wars he had won with the spoils of each war behind him. They were under Roman rule and under a horrible evil King of Israel who was a little nuts himself. And the priests and other religious leaders? Well, you know they read about his promised coming, but perhaps in their hearts it was just words in the Holy Book. Something that was to come but not in their live time.

Ring a bell?

So the world might have been waiting, but preparing for his coming? I doubt it!

What a shock it was for me and my friends in 1973 when we went on a journey to Bethlehem with United Methodists around the world. We were going for a special trip to where it all began, in the fields of Bethlehem where the shepherds heard the Angel's proclaim the birth of the Savior. We were there with thousands of Methodists who gathered for this special time to remember the birth of our Savior praying for a revival in our world to happen. It was a very moving experience. We were there for 10 days enjoying being where Jesus walked, seeing historical places, hearing the stories of Jesus from our guide, having communion at the tomb where they laid Jesus. It was wonderful. But what took away from some of it was the Israeli army sitting high above the entrance to the city with their guns at the ready prepared to stop any enemy who would try and attack the Holy City. Even as we walked the streets amongst the beggars and those who tried to sell us useless things there were soldiers with their guns walking in pairs up and down the streets keeping a close eye on things. One of our buses was stoned. That was scary. But we survived. The city of Peace? Well, it wasn't.

But looking back to that time in 1973, and even today there is still turmoil in the city of peace much like it might have been back in the days prior to the birth of

Jesus. So they waited for the promised one and they wait for the Messiah to come today. It is still told during the Passover meal. For them, the Jews of today, Jesus was a good person, a prophet, but not their Messiah. They still long and pray that one day he will come for it had been prophesied by the great Isaiah that one day it would happen. And so they wait! Prepared? That's another matter.

**Were the religious leaders prepared?** Well, we can guess not. Though they had the prophets of old to show them the way somehow many of them missed it. And when the Magi came looking for the new king that was born, we all know how thrilled King Herod was.

**Scripture foretold it. People were hoping for it. But they weren't prepared for his coming.** Sounds like the world and the church today. I'm afraid many people aren't prepared for his coming. I think when the angel told the shepherds about the Messiah's birth they were shocked and decided to go and see for themselves. Their question could have been why did God pick them to know of his Sons birth? Why not go to the religious leaders, or the high priest himself? But that's not how God works. If you search carefully you will find the story of the Saviors birth, his suffering, his death and his rising throughout the Scriptures.

Last year you might remember the shepherd who went to the manger was so excited to see the Savior lying in the manger he went door to door in Jerusalem to

wake the people to tell them the good news, the Messiah had come, born only a few miles away in a manger. Instead of people rejoicing and running to the manger they said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, go away, let us sleep.” They couldn’t be bothered. And though he told the story over and over for many years, after awhile he too wondered if what he had seen was true. Was that baby really the foretold Messiah? Or should he be waiting for another? Tough question.

This morning our Scripture comes to us through John the Baptist. He isn’t asking us if we are prepared. He’s telling us to be prepared. Listen to what he came to do. He came to tell people to repent, change their ways, prepare their hearts, their lives for the Messiah is coming....in fact he is here. That’s the Good News during trying times. That’s the Good News for us today. The King is coming and are we prepared to welcome him? Pretty tough question because we don’t know when he is coming again, except we know this. It could be soon. When the disciples asked about the day of the Lord when it would all be over, Jesus said don’t look for a day or time, for only God knows that. However, Jesus said, **BE PREPARED FOR WHEN IT HAPPENS!** It can be like a thief at night....or during the day time hour...or who knows. Prepare NOW! Be ready NOW! Don’t put off until tomorrow that which you need to do today.

Preparing! Great advice. As we prepare everything else for the holiday season don't forget to prepare your hearts and minds. Think about the gift that will be remembered always that isn't under the tree but has been given to us on the very first Christmas. For the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior came to earth to dwell among us in order to show us the Father's love and most importantly, to prepare us to spend eternity with Him. Sometimes it might seem that the secular world is trying to focus less on the Christ of Christmas, let the church remind the world that without Christ there would be no Christmas. Christmas is accepting the love of Jesus into your hearts and spreading that Christmas joy.

Got to ask the question again...are you prepared for his coming? Are you prepared to meet the great I Am?