



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 8, 2019
ISAIAH 11:1-10; PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19; ROMANS 15:4-13; MATTHEW 3:1-12

SOUL MAINTENANCE



When we were in graduate school, Chris and I took care of a section of the Ozark Highlands Trail in Northwest Arkansas. The instructions from the Forest Service were simple enough: keep a seven mile section of the hiking trail clear of trash and overgrowth. Any heavy lifting, like trail repair and reconstruction, would be done by the good people of the Forest Service. All they needed us to do was to keep the trail reasonably good working order. That was it.

But those simple instructions did not translate into simple action. We quickly

discovered that trail maintenance is not the same thing as hiking. Picking up trash takes a painstaking amount of time. It's hard to notice trash, let alone pick it up, while maintaining a comfortable walking pace. ...and then there are the plants. Forests are alive! Plants are always growing, especially in rich, warm soil of the Ozark Mountains. Despite our efforts, a veritable forest of small trees and bushes would greet us upon our return to the trail every few months. ...and so it was, this dance with us and forest and the trail that brought us together.

Preparing the way for hikers is challenging, and wow, it is so much more intense to prepare the way for the Lord. Isn't that what the prophets keep trying to tell us?! John the Baptist picks up the refrain uttered by Isaiah so many centuries before: God is coming into the world! Get ready to receive the presence of the Holy One!

What does it take to get ready for Jesus? That's part of the work of Advent, of course. There are the outward and visible signs of the season. Advent wreaths replace conventional calendars, and time takes on a new dimension. Candlelight brightens long winter nights, just as it hints at the coming Light of Christ into the world. Gifts are shared with friends and strangers, just as they are around this table: holy things for holy people.

Then there are the inward ways to prepare. We are drawn to the innermost places of our lives to look honestly ourselves and our relationships with each other and with God. This kind of preparation is not easy. And the gospel makes that clear this morning.

John issues a stark warning to anyone who takes on this work casually. Beware, he warns! Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Most of us can agree with that statement. Repentance is about more than words. The kind of repentance John proclaims brings

about the kind of change that reorients every aspect of life toward God. That kind of change manifests itself in thought, word, and deed. That kind of change that is affirmed in baptism and fed through bread and wine of the Eucharist. That kind of ongoing change is what we are about, and it's a good thing, right?!

But when John starts to talk about axes, felled trees, and all consuming fires, that's when I want to push back. That language is not helpful. The God I place my hope in is not a God who desires harm. Preparing to greet the God of peace is not about a violent act that it endangers those who undertake it. Nor is this spiritual preparation something that is inflicted on God's people against their will. That's not how God engages with us. That's not how divine love works.

So what is John trying to get at? Repentance and lasting change are important, that's for sure. But for whose sake? For repentance to have meaning, we have to first notice God in our midst, so we can then move toward God. It's hard to find God, let alone make a place for God, when we take up all the room ourselves. New life needs its own space to grow. Gardeners know this. So do parents. So does God.

For Jesus to come into our lives, some of our own clutter has to go. That's what John is

getting at: trail maintenance for the soul. This decluttering is not ours alone to do, nor is it God's alone to enact. Instead, we do this together. God longs to be with us as a partner and not as taskmaster. That's when healthy soul maintenance happens. That's what this season is about.

What keeps you from recognizing Jesus more clearly? What masks itself as God in your life?

For me, that kind of deep soul care started in seminary. That shift started with the decision to change seminaries in the middle of my first year. Moving from Seattle to New York to Austin within a five month period of time was not what any of us had imagined. Nor was the fact only I would move to Austin while Chris and Madeline would move back to Seattle. We had to make the hard decision to spend the next two and a half years in two places, navigating marriage and parenting across a 1,700 mile divide. Every day, I wonder about that decision. Could I have seen God in a different way, so we could have stayed together in one place? I also wonder how is God working through us now to heal and strengthen our relationships with each other.

That time was about something else: exposing and beginning to clear up some of

my own illusions: the hubris that I wore like an armor to protect myself from being hurt; the privilege that I had, and for that matter still do, that helps make ordained ministry possible; and the audacity to take so much for granted, especially with those who I love most. With God's help, that overgrowth is finally starting to be pruned back.

What's blocking your image of God right now? What gets in the way of God's path to you? Be willing to lean into those parts of your life that feel off center, or where there is deep pain or doubt. That's where you will meet God, and together, you will help prepare a place where new life will begin. That's where Christ is coming into the world through you. And know this: that practice will happen for the rest of your life.

American painter Edward Hicks¹ is most famous for the Peaceable Kingdom. Hicks painted this famous work as a response to the ideal of peace so eloquently stated in the 11th chapter of Isaiah, the one we heard this morning.

But the Peaceable Kingdom isn't a single work of art. Instead, at least 62 distinct versions of the painting exist. Over Hicks' life, the paintings evolved. When life was good, the characters in the paintings reflected

¹More information about Edward Hicks work and *The Peaceable Kingdom*, see <https://artandtheology.org/2016/12/06/the-peaceable-kingdoms-of-edward-hicks/> and

<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/16/arts/art-review-finding-endless-conflict-hidden-in-a-peaceable-kingdom.html>

that same calm. When chaos surrounded Hicks, his oil based animals took on more menacing personas. Those peaceable kingdoms look more like ones at war with themselves and with anyone caught up in their gaze. In the last print in the series, finished in the same year Hicks died, all of the animals are finally at rest. Some look exhausted, while others are comfortable. But they are all at rest.

The paintings are more than art. They are Hick's own mediation on the messiness of life and a peek into the heart of a man who sought understanding. By engaging in that messiness, somehow peace came for Hicks. So it will be for us, too.

The spiritual practices of Advent are not just for a season. They are our life's work. Every day, we prepare a place for Jesus here and now. As we do, we'll come to discover something else: Jesus, already there, waiting to welcome us home to ourselves.

O Come, God, and be with us now. Help set us free from the captivity that keeps us from you. Give us courage to care for the tender places of our souls just as you care for the whole human family. Nourish us from your eternal root, which is the source of all life. Give us hope to know that you, O Emmanuel, are with us now and always.

AMEN.

Matthew 3:1-12: *[In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,*

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.'"]

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."]