

Advent 2B (2014)
Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself, right? We overextend ourselves out of a sense of obligation and self-reliance. But none of us can save the world. And in Advent, we are reminded that we don't have to. Like John the Baptizer, we are tasked with preparing the way of the Lord, but in the end we lay our burdens on him. And, baptized with the Holy Spirit, we are renewed for lives of faith and love.

Think of everything that wouldn't get done if you didn't do it. Maybe you're the only one who goes to the trouble of putting up the Christmas lights, or sending the Christmas card, or decorating the tree. Maybe you're the only one who makes sure everyone gets a gift they'll love. Maybe you, and only you, are capable of replicating the beloved family cookie recipe. Come to think of it, maybe you're the only one who gets the family together in the first place. What's more, you're the one holding that group project together at school, or keeping your workplace from falling apart. Not to mention, you're the only one serving the church or the community in the way that you do. And in the end, no one else is able to adequately care for your ailing spouse, or your grieving friend, or your spirited child.

Think of everything that depends entirely on you. It seems that our responsibilities are never-ending, so we run ourselves ragged trying to fulfill them all, especially at the holidays. As the old adage goes, "if you want

something done right, you have to do it yourself.” And there’s so much that needs to be done right. So, **we overextend ourselves out of a sense of obligation and self-reliance.** There’s no time to stop, to rest, to take a look around. *Peace on Earth* may be the prevailing sentiment at this time of year, but there will be no peace in our hearts as long as our plates are this full.

John the Baptizer certainly bore the burden of responsibility. God’s reign comes near in Jesus, but before Jesus there was John.¹ His role as the forerunner of the Messiah required nothing less than a universal call for repentance, for self-reflection and a change of heart. In the fearless style of the Hebrew prophets, John cried out that all was not right with the world. The people had to be reminded of their brokenness and their need for God’s mercy, and John was the one to do it. So, **before Jesus even arrived on the scene to sow the seeds of God’s reign, John the Baptizer was hard at work tilling the soil.**

And the people were receptive. Our Gospel from Mark today records that “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” If so many were moved by John’s call to repentance, then he must have been a compelling preacher. Naturally, he developed a following, and John’s disciples may have even confused him with

¹ Mark Allan Powell, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2266.

the Messiah. And why not? **His ministry was unique and exciting, and he was making a real difference. Imagine the temptation to self-importance.**

But John's faithfulness shone brightest in his deference to Jesus: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me," he insisted, "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." **At the very moment that his responsibility weighed the heaviest - at the moment that he seemed the most indispensable to God's purpose - John the Baptizer pointed to Christ. *There is your savior, he confessed, there is your hope.***

So, what of our own unique responsibilities? What of the many burdens we bear? The temptation is to believe that the world would stop turning without us. And, of course, each of us plays a critical role in our families, in our classrooms and workplaces, in our communities. **We really do have much to offer, but the danger lies in offering it for the wrong reason. The prevailing assumption is that we're measured according to the difference we make, that we're only as valuable as we are productive. In other words, we need to be needed. No wonder we strain so hard to hold our families together, or to thrive at school or work, or to care for the needs of others. And, no wonder we often lack for peace of mind.**

This second week of Advent, let's allow John to point us to Jesus. Let's stop long enough to remember that we're still waiting for Christ to come into

the world for the sake of our healing and wholeness. And, as one interpreter observes, “if he is not here yet, that pretty much rules out the possibility that the savior is one of us. It guarantees that it is not me.”²

Dear church, none of us can save the world, and in Advent, we are reminded that we don’t have to. Like John, we are tasked with preparing the way of the Lord, that is, opening our eyes and our hearts to God’s life-giving purpose and repenting of the ways we have fallen short of it. But **the promise of Advent is that God comes to us whether we are ready or not.**³ Even as **we strive to hold our lives together, we can rest in the promise of the one who holds our lives. And in the end, we can lay our burdens on Christ, who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and renews us every day for lives of faith and love.**

² Lillian Daniel, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 48.

³ Powell.