

This week's Gospel sounds an awful lot like last week's Gospel, because they are roughly the same moment. Last week from Mark and this week from John's Gospel. The person crying in the wilderness, make way for the one who comes!

As I thought about this moment, so key to our Advent and preparation, I realized that I have always looked at Advent from a historical perspective. These are things that have happened. I read these passages and see the characters and think about how they are behaving in the world in which they live. My brain wants to put them in a proper time, somewhere around 30 AD or so.

Understanding them from the historical social settings might help me grab an identity with them. It has helped me understand exactly how hugely magnanimous Joseph's action of keeping Mary was. It made think of the societal pressures on a young mother. But this year, I realized that there was another way to view advent and its lessons. While I try to understand them reminding myself of the techno free world they lived in, it dawned on me that I live in a second world completely unlike theirs. I live in a post-resurrection world.

The call of John in the wilderness isn't just part of the Advent story, this is also the Easter story. And unlike the people in the Gospel today, I know how the story plays out. I know who John is talking about when he says the person they seek is among them. That he is preparing the way for Jesus, a real person among the people of that story. They don't know the rest of the Gospel because they are living it moment by moment.

Because I have had my Paul Harvey moment and know the rest of the story, I have approached the call of John rather smugly from the safety of a historical narrative. I read John's words and think how foolish the temple authorities are. I read the story and hear him calling to people

who have no idea of the presence of God among them and in doing so, am looking down on those folks.

Reading the call of John as a historical piece makes for a delightful Currier and Ives Advent that approach is really a defense mechanism to avoid the real, post resurrection lesson. We do live in a different world and because of that, the words of John should ring differently to us when he says

I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”

Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me;

The priests and Levites were confused by that and if we are all honest with ourselves, we are too. Because we hear the words, but until this year, I had never listened to the words. John’s call in the wilderness didn’t end with the Baptism and revelation of Jesus. John’s call is just as much to a post Easter church as it was to the people of his day.

How often do we go about our lives looking for God to appear in other people or places and failing to realize that the path for God with us is just as likely through us as it is through someone else? Among you stands one whom you do not know, may as well be restated for a post-resurrection people as “within you stands one whom you do not know” for each of us, child of God, creation of God, is a pathway for God to appear in the world.

It may seem easy for me, Mr. Synodically Authorized Minister, to say that each of us is a pathway for God. Afterall, I’ve been called to serve the church in this fashion. Well big fat deal. The Gospel is clear, Jesus didn’t show up in the temple very often, the Gospel is preached in the community among the people serving and loving. We gather here for

worship, we leave here for the Gospel. And it is among us that we find Christ living in our world, just as he was living among the people of John's proclamation.

People, including me, find this realization frightening because of the call to "Make Straight the Way of the Lord." We all know what this means, or at least we think we do. After all, it is both a blessing and curse to be called "Straight Laced." We expect "good church people" to walk the straight and narrow. So obviously making straight the way of the Lord means don't get in trouble, don't have fun....

Wrong. Some of the worst characters in the Bible and in the world today provide a pathway for God. Best person in the world or most angry and violent person, if God chooses to use them. God will. For those of us who want to live our faith, making the path straight is getting out of the way. God will get through whomever God chooses to use, making the path straight just makes it easier.

There's a lovely sign in the Wellington NZ airport with point A and point B and a twisty knot of roads to get you from one to another. It is there to remind visitors that in New Zealand roads are narrow and winding and two points that look close on a map might not be that easy to get to. Well, that's a little how we are with God sometimes. We build barriers within us. "I'll have time next week...." "Someone will surely check on that person... I don't want to intrude." "I'm not smart enough to help with that..." "I'm sure that person would be a much better choice...." Those are all roadblocks, twists and turns, and impediments that give us reasons to slow God's ability to work through us.

When I realized that the call to make the pathway for God more accessible was just as much to me today as it was to the group confronting John, it made me uncomfortable. It made me want to run and find films of cute children in bathrobe pageants with overly zealous

parents chasing them with cameras. Grab some candles and make a wreath to light. Sing some fun little advent Hymns. All of those things are much more appealing ways to celebrate this season than admitting the Advent call isn't for someone else, it is for me. It is for me to call out the road crews within myself, to make sure that I remove all of my own barriers and crooked paths that I set up as a defense against the loving the people I don't like or don't want to deal with.

Make the path straight. Prepare the Royal Highway. Be open to loving the unlovable. Even if they take advantage of your kindness. Be forgiving, not to clear someone else's conscience, but your own. Know that there is value in every living being because if we truly believe we are all God's creatures, we must acknowledge the dignity of others even when they refuse to acknowledge that dignity in themselves. Yes, some folks put up some serious windy roads and potholes and barriers, but compassion and love are frightening emotions because they make us vulnerable to others, and to ourselves.

Some people may not feel like God is in the world, especially right now. I can assure you that God is in the world, has been in the world and will be in the world. The thing that is stopping people from seeing the presence of God in our world isn't other people, it's ourselves. We are the crooked pathway. We are the rough places. We are the one being called to by John because the Messiah is among us.

Crooked paths, rough places, and all those delightfully poetic phrases are things that might slow the coming of Christ, but they won't stop it. Just as Jesus came into the world two thousand years ago with unlikely parents in an unlikely place, that is exactly how we will find him this year and every year. In the unlikely places with unlikely people doing unlikely acts of love. And if we get out of the way, we might be among the unlikely. Amen.