

Christmas is Tomorrow!—Prepare for the Glory of the Lord!

Focus: The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.—Isaiah 40:5

First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11

Second Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-8

A sky full of God's children! Each galaxy, each star, each living creature, every particle and subatomic particle of creation, we are all children of the Maker. . . . Children of God, made in God's image. It is love, God's limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine.—Madeline L'Engle

First Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11

Christmas is . . . tomorrow! That one goes back, way back. It's heard year-round here at Westminster, and has been for many years—many, many, many years—in committee meetings and staff meetings, in deacon and session meetings, at bell rehearsals and choir practices—“that was beautiful now make it better, [b/c you know “Christmas is . . . tomorrow” [oh, you've heard that before?].

“Christmas is . . . tomorrow.” Around here at Westminster, it's a way of getting ourselves ready, of reminding ourselves that we *need* to be getting ready, for Christmas. And as I said it goes back, way back, all the way back to the 8th century BCE . . . and the prophet Isaiah.

Oh Isaiah didn't say it in precisely those words. What Isaiah said was: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God . . . for the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.”

But what Isaiah meant by that was . . . Christmas is . . . tomorrow. And in delivering that message, Isaiah also offered tender words of comfort and resounding words of joy. Listen now for God's Word, Isaiah, Chapter 40 verses 1-11, and you'll see what I mean:

Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,*

and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

*Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather his lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Second Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-8

Christmas is tomorrow—John says it.

John the Baptist, I mean. Going back to the first century. As he comes in from the wilderness, as he prepares the way for the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, John the Baptist quotes the Prophet Isaiah.

Listen now for God's Word, the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Mark 1:1-8, and you'll see what I mean:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
 "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,' "

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*.

And 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.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; 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."

Sermon: Christmas is Tomorrow—Prepare for the Glory of the Lord

Christmas is . . . tomorrow. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

So how do we prepare for that, for the glory of the Lord? Or maybe a better question: is it even possible to prepare for it?

I mean, consider the shepherds at Jesus' birth:

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, for unto you this day is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. . . . And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing, "Glory to God, Glory to God, in the highest.

If you're the shepherds, how do you prepare for *that*?

So the shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, with the child lying in the manger. When the shepherds made known all that had been told them about this child; Mary treasured all their words and pondered them in her heart.

If you're Mary, how do you prepare for that?

The glory of the Lord—it can come from above, as it did for the shepherds, with the ringing, resounding joy of the angelic choir, the whole multitude of the heavenly host singing. From above—as Isaiah puts it:

See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
Get you up to a high mountain,
lift up your voices with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift them up, and do not fear;
say to the cities,
“Here is your God!”

Or the glory of the Lord can it can come from within, as it did for Mary. From within—again Isaiah:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather his lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

The Glory of the Lord: for *us*, at Christmas, It can come from above: the ringing, resounding, joy of *our* angelic choir, singing:

Masters in this hall, Masters hear ye news today, wondrous joy had I this little babe to see. This is Christ the lord, masters be ye glad Noel, Noel, Noel . . .

Or it can come from within, for us at Christmas, in the sound of the thinnest stillness, as we lift our candles and hum:

Silent night, holy night all is calm all is bright, glories stream from heaven afar, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

The glory of the Lord—it has quite a range, and remember Christmas *is* tomorrow. . . . so how on earth do we prepare for it? Is it even possible?

It's a little bit like . . . well, like *parenthood*, I think. I mean: How do you prepare for parenthood?

Oh, you do the best you can—prepare as best you can: you make and keep those appointments, go to the classes, buy the car seat, set up the nursery, and somewhere

around week 36, as sleep becomes harder and harder to come by, you pack that overnight bag and keep it right by the bed. . . the day is coming . . . Will it be tomorrow?

But all the while, doing all that, you know that parenthood's going to be full of surprises—a whole range of emotions and experiences—like nothing else you've ever experienced before. How do you prepare for it, *really*?

The glory of a child coming into the world—the wonder of life—of new life—and for all of us today, as Beau's church family, being part of that glory and wonder as his aunts and uncles in the faith; if you listen *today*, you can hear the ringing, resounding joy of the angelic chorus, the whole multitude of the heavenly host singing, Hallelujah.

And the glory of parenthood can also come from within, in the quiet moments: in the sound of the thinnest stillness, in a still small voice: sleep in heavenly peace: Please, God, please: let that child go to sleep.

Because you know, it's not all glory—parenthood, or for that matter *any* of our earthly journeys. There are times for all of us when the angelic chorus is not even the faintest echo of a memory, times when the silence of the night fills you with dread and breaks your heart.

Which is why we baptize. Because in baptism, God makes a promise: God promises to be with us—always. Not just in the glorious moments, but in all the moments of our lives, including the less than glorious ones, including when we ourselves are less than glorious.

In baptism, God claims us. Today, God claimed Beau as a beloved child, and declared that Beau, like all of us, belongs to God and always will.

I can remember—I'll never forget—when Graham, my youngest, he must have been—what?—eight years old—we were in the Mall, shopping, right before Christmas, and then, right there, in the midst all that chaos, he looked up at me, reached up, and took my hand. I can still remember the way his hand felt in mine—I'll never forget that. And I remember thinking at the time, "Remember this, cherish this, because it may be the last time." They grow up so fast.

But even as they do, God is with them. Even when we're not there, God is with them; God is with us—that's the promise of baptism. Even through those long, dark heartbreaking nights, especially through those long, dark, heartbreaking nights, they are not alone, we are not alone—God is there to take their hand, to take our hand, even when they, when we, are not aware of it—that's the promise of baptism.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather his lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom.

And yes, in baptism, we make *our* promises too. Brian asked us, and we promised, “as members of the church of Jesus Christ to guide and nurture Beau Benjamin, by word and deed, with love and prayer, teaching him to know and follow Christ.”

That was our promise, and we can make it because baptism seals a bond: in baptism, we are made one—with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. *Our* love and *our* prayers become part of that greater reality, which Beau will be part of wherever his life may take him.

We are one with Christ, because Christ is one with us—because Jesus was baptized too. Which, if you remember, caused John the Baptist more than a little consternation.

John’s baptism is “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” But Jesus is the one without sin, and John himself recognized this:

You heard it in the second Scripture lesson, John saying about Jesus, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” And so, when Jesus comes to John to be baptized, it pulls John up short. He looks at Jesus says:

“I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?”

But Jesus responds: “Let it be so now; for it is right for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

And *there*—right there—is the glory of God.

Jesus is baptized not for the forgiveness of *his* sins, but for the forgiveness of *ours*. Jesus undergoes baptism out of solidarity with us and for us—“to fulfill all righteousness,” as he said; in other words, so that *we* and the world might be righteous, freed from the sin that separates from God, ourselves, and one another, so that we might have new life.

The glory of God is *God with us and God for us*—God coming into our world and taking on our human condition for us—so that we might know the glory of God forever. *That’s* what baptism is all about.

The glory of God is God with us and God for us—God coming into our world and taking on our human condition for us—so that we might know the glory of God forever. *That’s* what Christmas is all about.

Sometimes, we become aware of that glory from above—in the ringing, resounding joy of the angelic choir, the whole multitude of the heavenly host singing, *Masters in This Hall*. And sometimes we become aware of that glory from within. in the sound of the thinnest stillness: *Silent Night, Holy Night*.

But always, always, whether we are aware of it or not, we live in that glory. “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, for unto you this day is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

So how *do* we prepare for that, for the glory of the Lord? Or maybe a better question: is it even possible to prepare for it?

Well I imagine, choir, that you have a few more rehearsals between now and Christmas . . . even if Christmas is tomorrow.

And we have the All-Church Advent Christmas Potluck Dinner and Choral Program this afternoon at 5. Join us. And *next* Sunday is the Service of Lessons and Carols—And by the way, readers we’re rehearsing *today* right up here at 12:15: Christmas is . . . tomorrow. Rehearsal, right after our Advent Sunday school class—which class is another good way to prepare. And the Noonday Carol Sing and Lunch is Friday the 16th; and Gifts from the Heart is going on—drop off next Saturday from 9-11— and Deacon caroling is next weekend too. All of those wonderful ways to prepare for the glory of the Lord.

But for today, right now, let me add one more way: Remember Beau’s baptism. Remember your own baptism. Remember Jesus’.

The glory of God is God with us and God for us—God coming into our world and taking on our human condition for us—so that we might know the glory of God forever.

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

God in the manger. “Here is your God!”

Christmas is tomorrow!

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.