

“Who Invited HIM?!?”

1st Pres San Bernardino

Isaiah 40:1-5,10-11; Mk 1:1-6

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Every year at Advent, in the midst of our beautiful processions and hopeful music, in crashes John the Baptist, bellowing about responsibility and sin.

Who invited HIM?!

He dresses strangely, his life is counter-cultural, he won't have turkey or eggnog but insists on bringing his own locusts...he is the one everyone avoids at the party.

“SIN,” for goodness' sake- who wants to talk about *that*?

I, for my part, avoid it like the plague, both in preaching and in personal conversation.

But according to this passage, the *beginning* of the good news of Jesus is not so much a party or celebration. The beginning of the Good News is the invitation to “prepare the way” by dealing with what it is in US that may cause offense or pain to the One who is coming.

According to the passages for this Sunday, it is in the **wilderness** that we are to prepare a way, in the **desert** that we are to make a highway, it is the **rough places** that need to be smoothed out. It is into these familiar and discouraging landscapes that the Holy One longs to come, and John's invitation to repent (or turn) is the beginning of the Good News we celebrate.

Speaking of preparing-

Last week many of us made small cardboard mangers and little baby Jesus' at the church Advent Event. We made yarn that looked like hay, and the idea is that during advent, each time we notice some act of goodness, some sign of God's grace in our selves or another, we place a piece of yarn in the manger. We are making, action by action, a safe and warm and welcoming place in our hearts and in our homes for the baby. This week I heard two great stories:

On Tuesday morning, Dotti Garcia went to a volunteer commitment which lasted longer than usual. She didn't get home until 2:00. As she walked in, Ernie said, “I've made you a salad, dear.” Gratefully, she sat down and picked up her fork. But before she could tuck in, he cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows (“ahem”). “Honey?” she said, “what is it?”

“**My YARN???**” he replied, “Where's my yarn??”

In another household, two siblings were arguing with each other. One of them said, “I am going to take yarn OUT of the manger for YOU!! You are **negative yarn!**”

This is, in fact, how we prepare: in fits and starts, imperfectly. Sometimes we forget our yarn, sometimes we are rather *attached* to our yarn, sometimes we are, in fact, ‘negative yarn’. The beginning of the good news is taking a look at our negative yarn, the things we say and do that make the manger harsh and unwelcoming.

When I was a teenager, I was taught that **sin is that which separates us from God or each other**. This remains for me the best definition. Sin is whatever puts distance

between me and the One who loves me best, what divides me from those I'm called to love.

What John invites ME to look at is **my tendency to try to do too much, and then to become anxious and stressed when I can't get it all done.** At first, it makes me feel good- I like to be someone others can depend on. I like to accomplish a lot-it feels impressive.

But after a while, it feels like a wilderness, like a desert. I am overwhelmed and discouraged and isolated, and God seems completely absent. This desire to GO and DO and ACCOMPLISH is what I am inclined to, but when I overdo it, it separates me from God, and from others. It is sin.

What is it for you? Greed? Laziness? Resentment? A need to control?

What is it that leads you into rough places?

Aw, geez. This stuff is all so *personal* and so *unpleasant*. Who invited HIM?!?

He comes like an illness we would not wish for, like physical pain we'd rather avoid.

But perhaps there is gift in his visit-

This year, as I recover from a long season of illness and surgery, my body will not LET me pretend I am the Energizer Bunny who keeps going... and going... and going... When I am trying to do more than I can in this season when I should be waiting and watching, I cannot cheat. My body insists on speaking truth to me, like John the Baptist. Part of my preparing this year is learning that if I am still, and patient, and trusting - then I can recognize the gifts of the Christ Child who brings grace into my wilderness: the beauty of a sunrise, the ability to eat what is before me, the love and support of partners in ministry.

The thing is, our sin separates us. **It prevents us from seeing Jesus or feeling his nearness, it keeps us from the Love we need most of all.** Here's a great preaching story:

A little girl, 8 years old, is expecting a new baby sister. Her parents are worried- she has made it clear she is NOT excited about this new baby and is not at all sure she wants it. After the baby arrives, though, she asks for a moment alone with her.

Her parents are uneasy, but they devise a solution. They agree to the visit- but they leave the baby monitor on. And this is what they hear:

"Baby? Tell me again what God is like. It's been too long since I've seen Him."

How long has it been since you've 'seen Him', welcomed the feeling of grace into your heart? Are there things you need to deal with that may cause offense or pain to the One who is Coming? This work, John says, is the beginning of the Good News.

And listen- Isaiah's word is one of **comfort**, God is speaking **tenderly** to those of us in deserts and rough places, and if you hear that Voice, then the work has already begun in you.

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.