

# An Invitation to Preparation

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**Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8**

We are in the season of Christmas parties. Some you dread. Some you anticipate greatly. Let us presume the Christmas party I am imagining is in that second category – people you want to see, a menu that you like, with clothing expectations that are just right. You can be who you are and enjoy who you're with. You enjoy yourself so much that you don't find an excuse to go home early; nor do you find yourself the next day regretting how late you stayed. If you are an introvert, you aren't forced to meet too many new people. If you are an extrovert, there is just the right amount of opportunity to connect with others. If you like to sing, there is singing. If you don't, there isn't. You can gracefully slip away to check the football score that is so important to you. If you eat meat, there is plenty of it, and it is good. If you don't, enjoy the vegan meatballs. They are terrific! You get the point – this is a party you want to attend. When you drive home, you say to yourself, "I really enjoyed that. I am glad I went." And you can't wait for next year.

That is the party I am imagining, though more so in every fashion. It almost reduces the vision we are about to consider to call it a party, but there are aspects that are so resonant.

We are in the season of Advent, a season of anticipation, of expectation, of waiting, of hope. This morning we gather in the spirit of preparation. We wait for the coming of the Christ child, God's love made incarnate in a world yearning for, hungry for, waiting for good news. And because this Advent Sunday is also a communion Sunday, I can't help but connect the two, this season of gatherings and this moment of grand feast. And I imagine us – all of us – the church, the world, each of us – in a posture of preparation, preparing humbly and gladly, hopefully and poignantly, for this birth, this news, this reality, to be with us to transform everything.

So let's imagine we are hosting a party, a dinner, a gathering. What would we do? How would we approach it? How would we prepare?

Poet Mary Oliver helps us a bit. Hear her poem called "Making the House Ready for the Lord."

"Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but/still nothing is as shining as it should be/  
for you. Under the sink, for example, is an/uproar of mice it is the season of their/many  
children. What shall I do? And under the eaves/and through the walls the squirrels/have

gnawed their ragged entrances but it is the season/when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And/the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard/while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;/what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling/in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly/up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will/come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,/the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know/that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,/as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.”

So our primary posture of preparation is hope. That God will come. “Come in, come in.” That fellow travelers will come. That at the end of the day our preparations become not about perfection, but about intention. That at the end of the day, it is less about who we are than about who he is, this one who comes to transform everything.

Yet still we are called to prepare. So we think about ***the place, and the guest list, and the menu***. We get hints.

Both the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist use wilderness imagery to help us understand the task. Then, and now, the terrain is rocky, the way uneven. Our job as we prepare is to make things as smooth as possible. Fill in the holes, even out the rough places. Make the journey safe, and secure.

And when it is difficult, we are reminded that we travel not alone. “Comfort, O comfort my people,” the prophet calls out. Comfort. Be comforted as you prepare. And when the way seems rough, remember that you are cared for, like a sheep, by the good shepherd. Remember, as you prepare, and be comforted.

This good news is followed by wave after wave of transformation. “The new rule of God,” Walter Brueggemann writes, “is evident in a stunning procession across the desert to make a new communal beginning with power and well-being.” (*Texts for Preaching*, Year B, pages 12-14.)

Our preparations call us to make ready and make room for this God, who will welcome us and make all things new.

These are words echoed by John, and punctuated by him. Prepare, prepare. Prepare by repenting and forgiving. Get your own life in some kind of new order, a new order that includes right relationship with those with whom there has been conflict and brokenness. We conceive of repentance as one thing, but it becomes something altogether different as it is linked with forgiveness. So that our party preparation becomes not just what we see – the table settings, the décor, the food and drink, but the very heart of the host, and the guests, as they connect at a deeper level in community and in hope.

The environment is one where barriers are eliminated. People can arrive easily. And the guest list is more expansive and open than ever we could imagine. It includes us, after all, but it also includes those we might not automatically include. That's where forgiveness comes in. And that's where a radical ethic of hospitality comes in.

I can't help but think about Ferguson, and now Staten Island, as we think about the environment, and the guest list. Let us continue to discuss, civilly, the particularity of the legal realities. But let not that discussion mask the deeper issue – racism in America, our ongoing scourge and therefore our ongoing invitation. When Isaiah and John contemplate the crooked being made straight and the rough places smooth, I can't help but think of all those, including persons of color in this nation, who have so many obstacles to overcome. That is our mandate, especially those of us with power and privilege and access, as we prepare a way for the Messiah. We should not be surprised by anyone's invitation to this party – that is what grace is about. So we shouldn't linger in making that invitation real for all our neighbors, all of God's beloved children.

And the menu. Today it is bread and cup. That is plenty. That is enough. A little morsel and a little sip. That is plenty. That is enough. And what it does it connects this season, Advent, with that season, Lent, and makes us understand how radical this birth is – because he comes not just to rule the world with truth and grace, but to die for that world, a birth for which we prepare, and a death which we remember at the table where he is both host and guest.

So the room is ready and the guest list is secured and the meal is on the table. Are we prepared? Perhaps. But perhaps our preparation calls us ever deeper into that for which we cannot be prepared. And that is good.

Frederick Buechner writes: "People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the Lamb, and when the bridegroom finally arrives at midnight with vine leaves in his hair, they turn up with their lamps to light him on his way all right only they have forgotten the oil to light them with and stand there with their big, bare, virginal feet glimmering faintly in the dark." (*Telling the Truth*)

We can never be fully prepared for what is to come. That's kind of the point. The journey. The invitation. So that when he comes, when the bread is broken and the cup poured, when the angels sing and the shepherds gather, when we say "come in, come in," we can be there, ready, for whatever happens next. Amen.