

The world can be divided into two kinds of people: those who have a sense of direction and those who do not. I do not; I could get lost driving down my own street. So planning a trip is a nightmare: you have to get a map, plot out the routes, be careful not to miss the right exits, the right turns. Because if you do, then you're lost. Then you have to stop, get out the map and figure out where you are and how to get back on course. But then came MapQuest. All you have to do is enter in your starting point and your destination – and voila – step by step directions with exact miles between each segment. A true gift from God to the directionally-challenged.

But the ultimate gift is the GPS, the Global Positioning System. Each of my last three cars has had a GPS receiver, and I have become totally dependent on it. I enter my destination and Wanda (I've named my GPS Wanda) will verbally guide me all along my way. "Take the third left turn" - "In a half a mile, take the exit on the right" - "Stay on Route 101 North." She's so smart. I've tried to learn about how the satellite system works, but for me, it's a miracle. It's like electricity: all I know is when I flip the switch, the light comes on. The technology is beyond me. Same with Wanda.

Unfortunately, even with Wanda's directions, I still make mistakes. I'll take the second left turn; I'll miss the exit; I'll get on the wrong road. But there's no need to panic. Wanda simply recalculates. Last month, Amanda and I were on a road trip from Berkeley to Palo Alto to the SONY store to buy Roger Crete's computer and then to Menlo Park to get Roger's old computer and then back to the SONY store so they could transfer all of his files, and then back to Menlo Park to visit with Roger, and then over to Pacifica so I could have a pre-Confirmation visit with Stephanie, and then back to Berkeley through the fog. There were several recalculations along the way, and I decided that Wanda's middle name is Grace. Although she couldn't prevent my accidentally backing into a car and causing Amanda to spill her coffee on herself, still grace was in operation because there was no damage to either car. In spite of me, Wanda Grace prepared the way and guided us all the way to the end of our journey.

So you can probably see where I'm going with this. As I thought about John the Baptist, who saw that his purpose in life was to prepare a way, I thought of Wanda. And as I thought about the way John was preparing was the way of Christ, I thought of Grace. John the Baptist was God's Positioning System, the GPS that Isaiah had proclaimed long ago: "In the wilderness prepare the way for YHWH, clear a road through the desert for our God."

The preparation we do in Advent-time is preparation for the way. It's not like the other preparations we do for the holidays; it's not about the baking and decorating. John calls us to prepare the way for God's renewing, transforming, enlivening, comforting, challenging, forgiving, creating, loving power to enter into our hearts and minds and lives. We call this power and presence Christ. We have called Jesus 'the Christ' because in Jesus we have seen "the living force of life and love and being of God"¹ - what John Shelby Spong calls 'Christpower.'

In Advent, we prepare the way – not as if we don't do it at other times; we should be doing it all the time – but it's at this time of year that we do it as an intentional preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmastime.

Today, as we participate in the rite of Confirmation, we recognize in a very special way the journey of life and faith, the way of Christ. In this rite of passage for Stephanie, we are all reminded that each of us is called to prepare the way for God in our families, friendships, and communities. We are way-makers and way-showers in the spirit of Jesus and John the Baptist. Our preparations open up ways of healing, peace, and blessing.

¹ Spong, John Shelby. *Christpower*, Saint Johann Press, 2007.

Stephanie has been preparing for this day. She knows a lot of stuff. She's had a good Lutheran education. She can tell you what the Bible says on any number of things. She's been asking questions and thinking about the things that she's heard and learned. Sometimes, I suspect, she's been a little frustrated, because many of her questions don't have simplistic answers. How many times has she heard (in response to her query) "That's a really good question"?

But we've said many times in this congregation that it's more important to ask the questions than it is to claim to know all the answers. In the Confirmation liturgy you will hear that the "service today understands that the proper meaning of 'faith' is closer to 'trust' than to 'belief' and that affirmation of beliefs is far less significant than the courageous living-out of faith."

The 'courageous living-out of faith' is the journey; it is the way that must be prepared. Advent reminds us that even when we move across what often seems like unmapped territory, there is a way that lies beneath us and calls us forward. So that in every instant of our lives, in every choice, in every action - there is a way that undergirds and informs us: God's Positioning System. Which is a miracle, that no matter how much we try to understand it, ultimately all we can know is that it works. It will give us guidance and direction on our way. And grace for in those times when we make the wrong turn or lose our way. We can depend on it.

Amen

Isaiah 40: 1-11

With words of incredible power the unknown prophet of Israel's exile in Babylon proclaims the good news God's people have been waiting long to hear. Deliverance is at hand. God's people are to be brought home to Jerusalem. It is God who is doing this, as a shepherd leads his flock homeward at the end of the day. Anyone who has sung or listened to Handel's "Messiah" will recognize that he took the opening recitatives for his majestic oratorio from this passage. The words of this Hebrew poetry are music in themselves.

It is written . . .

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and tell her

that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from YHWH's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way for YHWH,
make a straight road through the desert for our God.

Let every valley be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill made low;

let every cliff become a plain,
and the ridges become a valley.

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

A voice commands, "Cry out!"
And I answer, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass,
and its beauty is like the wildflowers:
The grass withers, and the flowers wilt,
when the breath of YHWH blows on them.
How the people are like grass!
Grass withers, and flowers wilt;
but the promise of our God will stand for ever.
Go up on a high mountain,
you who bring good news to Zion!
Shout with a loud voice,
you who bring good news to Jerusalem!
Shout without fear;
and say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
YHWH, O Sovereign One,
you come with power,
and rule with a strong arm!
You bring your reward with you,
and your reparation comes before you.
Like a shepherd you feed your flock,
gathering the lambs and holding them close,
and leading mother ewes with gentleness.

Mark 1:1-8

Mark's Gospel begins not with Jesus, but with John the Baptist. Immediately he quotes from Isaiah 40, transferring this reference to Israel's return from exile in Babylon in 639 BCE to the coming of the Messiah. The early church searched the Hebrew Scriptures for every possible prophecy about the coming of Israel's Messiah, no matter whether they were relevant or not. They understood the coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of those prophecies. Now that God's love and purpose for Israel were being fulfilled, John called everyone to prepare by repenting and being baptized.

It is written . . .

Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Child of God:
as it was written in the prophet Isaiah:
"I am sending my messenger before you,
to prepare your way,
a herald's voice in the desert, crying:
'Prepare the way of our God.
Clear a straight path.'"

And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate nothing but grasshoppers and wild honey. In the course of his preaching he proclaimed, "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandalstraps. I have baptized you in water; but the One to come will baptize you in the Holy Spirit."

