

"MAKING ROOM FOR CHRISTMAS"
December 8, 1991

TEXT: Mark 1:1-3 "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord'"

As December 25th grows closer and closer, my family and I are beginning to realize that Christmas will be very different for us this year. For the first time in over twenty years, we are going to have a one year old in the house. And, if I remember correctly, that means a special kind of joy and excitement we have not seen for some time.

But it also means something else. Little Jared is not only walking now, he is running, and, what is more, he has a child's curiosity about everything he sees. His mother has already warned us that he will probably get into anything that lies within his reach.

Now, to understand the importance of that, you need to know that the Muth household usually has a very "lived in" look. All of us are savers. Well, that is not quite true. I am willing to throw out Peggy's "stuff" and she is willing to throw out mine. But, after eight and a half years in the same house, our closets and bookcases are filled to overflowing. Sometimes it seems as though every horizontal surface has something on it. And we are about to play host to a high energy bundle of enthusiasm who just loves to get into things. That means that sometime between now and December 23rd, we are going to have some cleaning out to do in order to get ready for our Christmas baby.

But we are not the only ones. Anyone who celebrates Christmas the way one really should, is going to have a Christmas baby to contend with. That means all of us may have some cleaning out to do in order to make room for Christmas. And I, for one, am grateful to St. Mark for making that point so gloriously in this morning's scripture. In the first three verses of his Gospel, Mark proclaims, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord'"

With those words, he not only reminds us of the need for preparation, but, in fact, places the beginning of the "gospel" some six hundred years before Christ with that vision of Second

Isaiah. Imagine that! Six hundred years of preparation before the world was ready for the coming of Christ. Six hundred years for the expectancy of the Jewish people to be honed to a cutting edge. Six hundred years of Greek and Roman philosophers before the world was ready to accept the things which Jesus taught and lived. Six hundred years of wars and intrigues before the Roman Empire was large enough and strong enough to make possible the kind of travel and communication that could sustain a world religion. Only then, in what St. Paul called "the fullness of time" did God send His Son to a longing, waiting world.

And it is important for us not to lose sight of that. Advent is a time to think about preparation. Our preparation for the coming of Christ. Not just for the celebration of Christmas, but for the coming of Christ now to us in all the wonder and power of that first Christmas. I am not talking about the end of the world. I am talking about the coming of the Spirit of Christ into your life and mine now --or at least as we are ready to receive him.

Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20) But before we can hear, we have to be ready.

So listen again, if you will, to those words of Isaiah 40:3-4, which Mark was quoting: "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 made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places smooth." Then, and only then, shall the glory of the Lord be revealed to us. But where is that way to be prepared? And how? And by whom?

The answer to the question, "Where?" is found in the eighty fourth Psalm, verse five: "Blessed are those whose strength is in Thee, in whose heart are the highways to Zion." Where else but in the human heart is there a fitting pathway for God? And where else but in the human heart are there obstacles which even God can not --or at least will not overthrow?

Physical barriers, even the most desolate and barren desert, are no obstacles to God. It is only in the human heart that there are barriers which Love must take seriously if it is to remain love. The preparation which makes straight in the desert a highway for our God is now, and always has been, in our own hearts.

All right, then, but "How?" How can this highway be prepared? I confess that at this point I am tempted to be "cute." To equate the valley with the lower levels of life which need to be exalted for God to feel at home in our lives. To see in the mountains and hills the pride that has to be brought low. To suggest that the crooked places are unrighteousness and the rough places lovelessness.

But that passage from Isaiah is clearly poetic, and the essence of Hebrew poetry is its parallelism. The valleys and the mountains, the crooked and rough places are not separate ideas, each with a meaning of its own. They are parallel ways of saying that whatever gets in the way of love has to be eliminated if God is to dwell in our hearts. It may be pride, or some unconfessed sin, or something else altogether. But whatever blocks the pathways of love must be filled in, or knocked down, or pushed aside in order to make room for Christmas. To make room for God in our hearts. For He will not come till there is a place for Him. And we must search our own hearts, our own lives, to discover what our roadblocks are.

But who can do all this? Who can rid our hearts of the things and attitudes which block the way of love in our lives? It would be tempting to say that we, ourselves, must do so. But I know how often I am unable to follow my own best instincts. And I find a kindred spirit in the Apostle Paul, who wrote, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:18-19)

If I can not do it, and God will not do it, then who can prepare the way of the Lord? The answer is, "No one!" No one. But what no one can do, God and I can do together. God will not do it without my permission, and I can not do it without God's power. So the obvious answer is for us to join forces. For me to provide the permission and for God to provide the strength. Or, as St. Paul wrote, ". . . Give yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and surrender your whole being to Him to be used for righteous purposes." (Romans 6:13, Today's English Version)

That is the message of Advent. Let us not allow these remaining few weeks before Christmas to be just a time for baking cookies, and wrapping present, and decorating trees. Let us not permit the hustle and bustle of pre-Christmas activities to keep us from celebrating Advent. Instead, let these days be a time for prayer, and scripture, and self-examination to discover what there is in our hearts and lives that prevents the Christ Spirit from coming alive in us.

And, most of all, let it be a time for turning --turning away from old habit, old distractions, old priorities, which, however unintentionally, have kept God at arm's length. A time for turning our hearts to God --openly, honestly, trustingly--inviting God to dwell at the center of our thoughts, our plans, our actions, and our lives. Inviting God to do for us what we can not do by ourselves. To make straight in the desert a highway for our God, to prepare His way in our hearts that the Glory of the Lord may once more be revealed.