

2nd Sunday of Advent Meditation at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
December 6, 2020 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Let's imagine that we have gathered in this holy space to have an Advent Quiet Day or Retreat Day with our Lord...because we really want to go deeper in our relationship with God in this Advent/Christmas season.

In a retreat meditation, the leader shares some reflections on Scripture and offers some questions emerging out of Scripture which can take people deeper in their reflections. As people reflect on the questions, God often gives fresh intuition or guidance or perspective for next steps they can take in deepening their love relationship with God and their neighbors.

You won't have time to write all the questions down during this meditation, so don't be anxious about that, just keep listening prayerfully. At the end of this service, the written questions will be on the screen. Also, the meditation will be on the website so you can read through it as part of your silent reflection.

What is most important to note is that this meditation will not have its fullest influence in your life unless you take perhaps a half hour on your own, after the service is over, to ask God to help you respond to these questions.

Today, both Scripture readings speak about a voice crying out in the wilderness. A wilderness is a wild, uninhabited, perhaps dangerous region where there are no roads and no clear pathway for a person to get to the other side.

We are now living through a Covid wilderness time. We are blessed that a Covid vaccine is on the way. Yet no one really knows how the next year will unfold. There is no clear path which will get us all through this time of danger, uncertainty and changes in the way American society functions.

Some of us are experiencing a wilderness of isolation from people we love and care for. There can be real grief in isolation. For many people, there will be an economic wilderness ahead. Many will lose jobs, lose their homes or apartments. There has been a significant increase in mental health struggles, domestic violence, suicides, opioid and alcohol deaths, especially among younger people and racial minorities. Much of the world is experiencing this same kind of wilderness time from Covid and multiple other problems we seldom hear about.

Our Scriptures remind us today that, in this local and global Covid wilderness, a voice is crying out, saying: prepare the way of the Lord... for God is coming among you to bring comfort and hope. Let me repeat that encouraging word of Scripture...

We don't know when or how God will come. The people of Jesus' time did not know when and how God would come. But in Jesus, God showed up in the wilderness of Roman Occupation that had been oppressing the people of Israel for over 60 years. The challenge was, many people did not recognize God showing up in the life of Jesus.

I wonder how often do you and I recognize the ways in which Jesus is showing up in our wilderness time?

Question #1: Make a list of ways you have seen Jesus showing up in the past 9 months, in your personal life, in our nation and world.

We often miss God's coming because we are not looking for it, not expecting it. Today's Scripture tells us that God is coming to help us in our wilderness experiences. The voice gives us an assignment. In the wilderness, prepare the way for God's coming.

How do we prepare the way for Christ's fresh coming into our Covid wilderness? John the baptizer called people to first, be aware of the ways in which they were focused on their own desires and anxieties, making themselves the center of their lives...instead of making God, following God's Way of Love, the primary focus of their lives.

Then John invited people to repent, which means to change the direction, change the priorities of their lives so that they would be more open to receiving God's love and guidance, and then open to sharing God's love with their neighbors in need.

We prepare the way for God's coming into our wilderness by being on both an inward journey to focus our lives more clearly on receiving God's coming...and by being on an outward journey to share God's love with others in need around us. Let's begin by focusing on the inward journey.

Question #2: How has your connection with God has changed in the last 9 months? In what positive ways have you grown and deepened in your connection with God? In what ways have you drifted away and find yourself feeling less connected with God in your daily life?

Most of us have had our previous daily schedules disoriented by Covid restrictions. Some have found that they are praying more, connecting with some of the online resources of Trinity during each day and each week. Some are finding that they are so anxious and consumed by different media connecting us to people, news and entertainment, that they are actually less aware of God as a result of Covid quarantines.

Of course, God promised to be with us always. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. But sometimes we forget how close God is to us, how to stay connected with God's love which always surrounds us.

We all know what it is like to prepare a meal. We know what it is like to prepare our house for guests to come. Preparation takes intentional work and effort. If you and I want to prepare ourselves to be spiritually sustained and guided by God in the continuing months of Covid Wilderness that lie ahead of us, we will need to invest intentional time and effort to prepare ourselves to receive Christ into our lives each day.

Right now you are watching this Eucharist in your home, which is one way to receive Christ into your life. Of course, it is one thing to look at the screen, to listen to my voice as perhaps you clean up your kitchen or do some other chores. But if you are really interested in receiving Christ more deeply into your life in this service, it will take some effort.

Question #3: How will you prepare yourself to receive Christ in online Sunday worship?

In the early Covid days, Rebecca and I watched this online Sunday Eucharist at the table as were eating breakfast. We soon noticed that we were not really as engaged in the worship of Almighty God while we were eating breakfast ...as we usually are when we are in Church. The church environment helps us to focus on God and eliminates many distractions that are around our home.

So now we prepare for online worship each Sunday by dressing, as we used to dress for church. We shut off our phones, sit together in the living room, light some candles on each side of the computer which is on our coffee table. We used to kneel and talk with God when entered the church. So before we turn on the service, we pause in silence to talk with God, ask the Holy Spirit to help us experience God's presence, guidance, peace during the service. Then we turn on the service.

We have our prayer books and hymnals with us so we can sing and follow along in the prayer book, just like we would do at church. We keep learning and experimenting with how to make the worship more helpful for us.

Online church will never replace meeting with a community in our beloved church building...but we can take some very intentional steps set an environment that can prepare the way for God to come into our lives as we give our full attention to worship at home.

Question #4: On Monday to Saturday, how have you been praying at home during the last 9 months? What changes might God be inviting you to make in the way you pray each day?

For example: How do you begin your day with God? How do you keep connecting with God throughout your day? Do you listen to music that helps you pray? Do you pray at meals? How do you end your day with God? Do you take time to offer your thanks for the blessings of the day? Do you ask God to help you reflect back over the day to see what you might have learned...notice where and how God might have been active in your life during the day?

We prepare the way for God to come to us each day by the way we pray. We can also prepare the way for Christ to come to us each day by reading and reflecting on Scripture.

Question # 5: What have you been reading and learning in Scripture to prepare you to receive and share Christ in your life? What changes in your interactions with the Bible could help you grow more in the coming months?

We can all develop a pattern of connecting with God through the Bible during the week. We can read and reflect on God's Word as part of praying Morning Prayer online or on our own. We can read Forward Day by Day or reading Richard Rohr online. Have you read any books recently that help you grow spiritually? Have you taken time to be part of any of the Adult Education and prayer opportunities available online at Trinity or other parishes and online resources? No guilt here, simply opportunities.

In addition to the inward ways we prepare to personally receive God's daily coming, God also calls us to an outward journey, to prepare the way for Christ to come into the lives of people around us during this wilderness time.

Question #6: Make a list of the ways in which you have reached out to help others in the last 9 months. Then begin a list of additional ways and additional people God might inviting you to reach out to, to prepare the way for others to experience Christ's love.

I'm sure all of you can be encouraged to see the many little ways in which you have been able to prepare the way for Christ's love to flow into the lives of others over these months through your daily interactions, through our parish mission outreach ministries, through calling people who are alone, sending encouraging emails, writing notes. As we watch or read the news, we can intentionally pray for the needs around us and around the world. Our prayers help to prepare the way for Christ to come to the people and situations in our current wilderness. And God often shows us how to act in response to our prayers for others in need.

If we were at an Advent Retreat Day, I'd close with a prayer now and send you off to spend perhaps twenty or thirty minutes in silence, to pray and reflect with God as you respond to these six clusters of questions. So...this meditation is not over yet. It will not be complete until you take some so time alone, in your home, or outside, to talk with God as you reflect on and respond to the questions.

Again, the questions for reflection will appear at the end of this service and the text of the meditation will be available on the parish website.

Right now let's close our eyes and be still in God's loving presence for a moment...

What has God stirred up in you as you have listened to this meditation?...

When will you set aside a little time to pray and reflect with the six questions that can help you identify specific ways you can prepare the way for Christ's daily coming into your life and flowing through you into the lives of others?...

I'll close with a prayer from Thomas Merton which is a good prayer to keep praying as we walk through this Covid wilderness season.

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Thomas Merton. in Thoughts in Solitude