

“Are you Ready?”
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Isaiah 64: 1 – 4, 8 – 11

1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

John 1: 6 – 8, 19 – 28

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22 Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23 He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ” as the prophet Isaiah said. 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26 John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

A few summers ago, I booked a backpacking trip in the Great Smoky Mountains. It was something I'd always wanted to do. I spent months getting ready, Training hikes, gear lists, maps, I must have packed and repacked my backpack a dozen times. I studied maps. Went on a 10 mile practice hikes with 50 pounds of weights in my backpack.

I was ready.

And on the trip, or the first two days of the trip, my excellent preparation showed. I had snacks not just for me but snacks to share with the group. I had bandaids for their blisters readily accessible. Extra clips and ties and wipes. I was prepared, and it showed. I love being the prepared one. The one who has whatever anyone needs in any given situation.

The problem was the thing things I hadn't prepared for. The rain. The wet socks and boots that would not dry out in the humid conditions. The bees. The trip leader who NEVER STOPPED TALKING and the other trip participants with whom I had nothing in common.

I was so very, very ready prepared that I had failed to consider the unexpected, and is so threw me off, that I couldn't recover. I was miserable. And I left the trip after just a few days.

Most of us, when we think about being prepared, think about it as I did that trip.



And there is nothing that speaks to this more than the tool that I have in my hand. A multi tool. In this case, a Leatherman, but you can find them under many labels and brands.¹ An icon of American preparedness. This little tool can help you do just about anything, from building a shelter to hanging a picture. Trimming a loose thread to escaping from a locked room. With this, in our day-to-day minds, we think that we are ready for anything.

And, often, we approach Christmas in the same way. Or at least I do. I'll have lists and spread sheets to make sure I don't miss a gift or a thank you note. I manage schedules and consider, carefully, what I want to say yes to and what we need to say no to in order to enjoy this crazy season. I want to be ready for whatever comes my way.

¹ What is a Leatherman? **Leatherman** is a trademark for a line of multitools produced by the **Leatherman Tool Group**. The tools are usually slightly larger than a Swiss Army knife of similar functionality; each generally includes a knife, pliers, screwdriver, and assorted other devices. A primary distinguishing feature between a Leatherman tool and a Swiss Army knife is that the Swiss Army knife is essentially a knife with other tools stored in the handle while a Leatherman tool is essentially a pair of pliers with other tools stored in the handles. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leatherman>

But along comes Isaiah. Along comes John the Baptist. (And thank God they do) to throw us off of our game. Because preparing for God is different. Very different. Completely different.

Preparing for God is not about anticipating every possibility. Preparing for God is about peeling away the layers and becoming vulnerable to the possibilities.

It is about bringing to the surface the vulnerable believer within who **can be** overwhelmed with the wonder of God's love and truly believe that God was born in a little baby, a baby who grows to live and preach and point us the way to God, the One who is truly our Alpha and Omega.

The weather worn cynic cannot believe it, and that is why we need and are given this season of Advent. Why John the Baptist tells us to prepare the way.

To strip away the calluses brought through experience.

Let go of our cynicism.

Discard guilt and shame.

Disregard grudges and assumptions.

Chisel away at the chips we carry on our shoulders.

Consider where we allow fear to make our decisions and follow faith, instead.

To take off the masks we wear sometimes or every day, the masks we wear because we think we are supposed to, and show instead the creation God placed within each and every one of us.

Take all of these things off, layer by layer, until we are nothing more and nothing less than what God created us to be, beloved, forgiven, gifted children of God for whom nothing less will do than changing the world. Who hope in spite of knowing the facts. Who believe.

That's the kind of preparation God asks of us. Not to gear up, but to strip down and let go, so that we can recognize and welcome God when he arrives.

Clark French, a pastor in North Carolina wrote about something that happened in the life of his church. He wrote:²

The idea was old and simple: take the church committee meetings scattered throughout the week and gather them into a single meeting night. We picked Wednesday and built a little program. We planned to begin with a short service of evening prayer, move to the parish hall for a bring-your-own supper, and then disperse to our various committees.

² <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-08/feast>

The part I was looking forward to most was dinner. In my mind the parish hall would be buzzing like a start-of-term feast at Hogwarts. And like the story of the loaves and fishes, those who came with plenty would share with those who had no food.....Excitement was in the air.

A dozen folks ate dinner on the first Wednesday: four staff members, seven parishioners, and a gregarious child from the neighborhood who noticed the lights were on and wandered in. We opened glass containers of kale-based salads. One person brought a single serving of rice and beans, another person brought a serving of quinoa.....The child, of course, came without anything to eat, and she was not tempted by our fare. Some frantic searching led to the discovery of an ancient package of microwaveable frozen pizza pockets. We silently noted the freezer burn, but the girl wasn't concerned. She ate it all. We called the evening a modest success and promised to bring some of our own family members next time to shore up the numbers.

A week later the girl brought a couple of her friends, and the week after that there were as many children as adults. Someone did a Costco run for a jumbo box of pizza pockets. The children started to join us at evening prayer. They weren't familiar with our church and didn't have parents there to hush them. Many had names that sounded altogether unlike the names of our children. They didn't know [our] rules....After dinner they would roam the halls and poke their heads into our meetings.

We managed for a few months, but gradually the church members quit coming to dinner. Tension about the children's presence was growing, and there were heated conversations...

One Wednesday evening I told the kids that we weren't going to do the dinners anymore. The very next week I heard the telltale stomping in the hallway above my office that always alerted me to their presence in the building. I made my way upstairs to the kitchen, where I found two eight-year-olds cooking ramen noodles on a stove. They smiled at me and blurted out, "We brought our own food! Would you like some?"

The next week I found the children outside the locked door to the kitchen, happily munching uncooked ramen noodles straight from the package. Again, they offered to share.

I don't remember the exact moment when I figured out the extent of my shortsightedness, but when it finally hit me, I could hardly breathe. I'm not exactly sure what the menu will be like at the eternal banquet, but I hope it includes ramen. Or pizza pockets. I also hope I'm there to help keep the feast.

The Coming of God is not something we can handle or absorb. It isn't something we can schedule or manage. It can only be welcomed, by those open and vulnerable enough to receive it.

So let us remove the layers we have heaped onto our hearts, the expectations of our minds, the blinders from our souls, so that we might see Jesus, whenever, and wherever he comes.

And now, with the words of Margaret Anne Huffman, let us pray.

Into the bleakest winters of our souls, Lord, you are tiptoeing on tiny Infant feet to find us, hold our hands. May we drop whatever it is we are so busy about these days to accept this gesture so small that it may get overlooked in our frantic search for something massive and overwhelming. Remind us that it is not you who demands large, lavish celebrations and enormous strobe-lit displays of faith. Rather, you ask only that we have the faith of a mustard seed and the willingness to let a small hand take ours. We are ready. Amen.

Amen.