

# Sermons at Christ Church

## Arise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Advent II  
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Almighty God, the Great Thumb we cannot evade to tie any knot; the Roaring Thunder that splits mighty trees: the all-seeing Lord up on high who sees even the footprints of an antelope on a rock mass here on Earth. You are the one who does not hesitate to respond to our call. You are the cornerstone of peace

Advent-The Talking Drum of God's coming. I grew up learning that we have long had talking drums. Yes, drums that talk. I wondered to myself how a drum can talk. Drums don't have mouths like you and I and so how do they talk? And what do they say? Talking drums were a means of communication. Centuries ago when our forbearers didn't have the luxury of cell phones and other modern means of communication, they relied on those talking drums to communicate an impending danger or a season of joy.

When I hear those huge talking drums, I get a chill-how could our ancestors have known what a drummer intended to convey. But to understand the message of the drum is to be discerning. Advent isn't only about the talking drum of God's coming, but it is also about our ability to discern the future of our life in God. The prophet talks about that future kingdom in glowing terms, but do you see it? Do you see yourself as being a part of that future? Advent-the talking drum of God's coming.

The message of the drum is quite simple-prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John the Baptist beats Advent's drum in the wilderness ...prepare the way of the Lord. The reality, however, is that the Lord isn't coming by I-95, I-70, 29 or even Snowden River Parkway. You and I have to carve a path in preparation for his coming. You and I have to make ourselves ready. And I believe there are three ways we can be ready.

First, preparing the way would mean listening to what the drum is telling us about ourselves-that we are covered in darkness. God's beautiful creation covered in darkness and so cannot show forth God's glory. This idea of being covered in darkness takes me back to the creation story in Genesis, where the earth was formless and void, and darkness covered the face of the earth.

On the first day, creation was about light and the separation of light from darkness. The human purpose is about light and the human enterprise is solely for the purpose of glorifying God with that light. And every fiber of our being reaches out for that. But if we are covered in darkness, how can we glorify God?

What I find most inspiring about the gospel story was that everyone was coming out to John to be baptized-even Pharisees and Sadducees, people who were symbols of righteousness. There's a story of a Pharisee and a Publican who went up to the temple to pray. The core of the Pharisee's prayer was that he wasn't covered in sin like the publican standing next to him. He checked the boxes and that was enough for him. But the fact that those who considered themselves righteous were reaching out to be baptized tells a much broader story about the human condition-all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and our righteousness is like dirty rags says the prophet Isaiah. More than that, the impending judgement is one where even our shared ancestry with Abraham isn't enough a guarantee to save us. Advent is the talking drum which reminds each of us about our sinfulness and calls us to repentance. The kind of repentance which isn't about turning away from past ways, but it is about doing something, it is about inaugurating a new future with God, one which promises a new life in Christ Jesus.

Second, preparing the way of the Lord would mean listening to what the drum is telling us about ourselves, that we are stiff-necked people. The one theme that keeps coming up during the Exodus was that the people of Israel were a stiff-necked people. Remember, the ancient Israelites had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt. But they were so difficult to lead. Not only were they stubborn, they did not act in the way God purposed for them. No act of God to satisfy them was enough. They complained and heckled Moses. They kept going back and doing the same old stuff for which they had repented. It was as if nothing had happened. The persistent plea of Moses to God was for God to remember that God's people are stiff-necked people.

Come to think of it, we are not very different from the ancient Israelites. We are also stiff-necked people who have developed hearts of stones. As a result, no amount of words move us to act in fulfilling God's purpose. No amount of prodding motivates us to cast away the works of darkness. Like the ancient Israelites, we have also been redeemed from the slavery of sin. The blood of the lamb has been shed for our salvation. We have been made whole, a new people set for freedom. However, we use our new freedom to engage ourselves in the very same stuff-the sin from which we have been saved. Yes, we do also change, but for a moment.

For whatever reason we simply cannot stop ourselves from challenging God's place in our lives. We seek to be the masters of our own lives. If anything at all, Advent's drumbeat is an invitation to re-evaluate God's place in our lives. More than that, it is about whether we are ready to hear the words of the prophet crying out in the wilderness-prepare the way.

Lastly, preparing the way of the Lord would mean listening to what the drum is telling us about ourselves, that we have become captive to our emotions. There's an infamous biblical story of Cain and Abel, two brothers, sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. Both were invited to offer a sacrifice to God. Each offered a gift of his handiwork. But then when God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's, his emotions got the best of him, he killed his brother Abel. When God inquires from him where Abel was, his response was, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, you are your brother's keeper, you are your sister's keeper, for if you are not your brother or sister's keeper, what then are you? If you are not your neighbor's keeper, what then are you?

We have become so captive to our emotions that we have sincerely ditched our ultimate responsibilities to our brothers and sisters. For many of us, Cain's question more than resonates with us-we live in the tension of discerning if we are truly our brother or sister's keeper. The problem is when our emotions take us captive, it becomes incredibly difficult for us to consider another person's place in our lives, or to discern God's will in each sacred moment. Yes, I dare to use the word sacred because each moment of our life is sacred, each interaction with any other person is sacred.

Unless you do not believe that each moment of your life is sacred, you would feel the need to act on those emotions that debilitate human relations. But if you do believe that each moment of your life is sacred, then you cannot hold on to anger, hate, bitterness, disappointment, resentment, much more to act on them. For the moment we act on these is when ordinary quarrel turns into a feud and when we distort God's vision for us. Listen to Paul's prayer "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Live together in harmony and glorify God with one voice. How can you do that if you are consumed with negative emotions? Advent-the talking drum of God's coming.

If Advent is to create a new sense of alignment for us, then it is one where we will have to open our ears to the constant drum beat of John's words "Repent for the kingdom of God is near," But know this, repentance isn't a one day or a moment event, repentance is an ongoing process to which we have to commit ourselves.

Remember this, there isn't enough preparation of ourselves to meet God's Messiah, and holding on to destructive emotions certainly wouldn't help. My beloved, what emotional turmoil holds you captive? What deep wounds and emotions rage within you like boiling water? If there are any in you, the sound of the talking drum invites you to be prepared to let go. For the coming kingdom cannot contain even an ounce of those emotions.

That coming kingdom is the only kingdom the prophet Isaiah sees, it is a kingdom where each of us is called to be a mother of God, because God is always waiting to be born. How pregnant are you with God? How ready are you to give birth to a new you in God? Maybe, if you turn your ear just a little bit, you may hear the talking drum of Advent. Amen.