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2 Advent, 12/4/11

“Get me to the church...!”

And so we begin. Again. On this 2nd Sunday of Advent, in the Gospel of Mark, John the Baptist announces the arrival of Jesus into the world. No birth story. Jesus just shows up to be baptized. And we acknowledge and celebrate the advent of Jesus every year at this time. But one of the things we keep talking about here at St. Martin's, and what many of you have articulated as a wish to me, is a desire for not merely an intellectual or abstract experience of God, but a direct, or authentic experience of the divine. A direct experience this Advent, of God come among us. A light into the world. A straightening of God's pathway into our hearts. A prophetic voice calling into *our* wilderness to wake us up. Waking us to be born anew as Jesus, the word made flesh, is born anew.

Last week, I asked the question, “What will be our advent, our access into this Advent season, that is near to us and our lives? An insistent voice we cannot and would not quiet, calling us into deeper, more intimate relationship with God. A freedom to experience joy apart from all the noise around the holiday. And as I pondered this, I was speaking to the woman of my life, Amanda, an Episcopal priest serving in a church in Wichita, KS. And she said, “Um, Chris, what about the fact that we just got engaged to be married this past week in Florida while visiting your mom? I'm announcing it to my congregation this Sunday.” And I was like, “Uh, *yeah!*”

Let me just say I know this is news. And it is an extraordinary blessing for me and this parish. She is a great priest, a fantastic woman, and a wonderful person. But as a priest myself, there are pretty specific protocols and sensitivities around clergy romance. So its been a little tough these last months not talking about her. And we will discuss this wonderful development in my life in depth, I promise.

But when she said that to me, as often happens, this scripture began speaking to me in a whole new way. Suddenly the voice of God calling me into deeper relationship with the act of lovingness as the central imperative, comes through her. Hers is the voice that, at this moment, is calling into my wilderness, and drawing me into embrace. This is the voice that is making

God's path straight for me—the path of learning how to be fully human, fully humanized, in loving partnership with a life, and with all of life itself, beyond my own singular capacities. Suddenly when Jesus is talking about love and compassion, not of victories and domination, as his final message in his last days, I get the reason. Because in the warm glow of this kind of love, I am at peace. God's mouth to my ear.

Suddenly, when Isaiah is proclaiming that on the day of the Lord God “will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” it moves me in unexpected and unexplained ways. I see Amanda holding a baby and think, “That's God”, the most pure expression, for me, imaginable. It becomes an access, for me, of what I described last week, about the mom here who wants her Advent this year to be as near and intimate as holding her own babies.

And it builds toward the question addressed by each of us. Through whom is the prophetic voice of God calling us to new birth, and relationship? What can be our direct experience of Isaiah's and Jesus proclamations that God is crashing into the wilderness of our self-regarding and often self-defeating world? That we are to “...prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” What can prepare the way of the Lord, and make a highway, not footpath, a *highway*, through the desert of our reservations, fears and worries? Because the Hebrew here is in the command form, telling the reader, the listener, us, to do this. It is we who do the work of God—at no point are we to sit and wait for someone else to do it.

What can help prepare a highway for God into our hearts this Advent? Maybe it's a breakthrough in a relationship with a parent, or a spouse, or a child; or inspiration from a public figure, or a cause, or a grief, or a joy, or a work of art. What can give birth to a new you, yearned into the world through the person of Jesus, always calling us to nurture, and be nurtured, in our relationship with God and each other? It's a profound, and life changing question, if we really ask it, and listen for the answer.

And yet...and with scripture, as with life, there is always a “yet.” For in the same breath that Isaiah speaks of lambs and mother sheep, he also speaks of death, “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ...The grass withers, the flower fades...” And these are the stakes. For everyone. Inescapable. Possibly depressing. But wait a minute. The ring I gave Amanda belonged to my grandmother Emma, who I never knew. My dad's mom died in childbirth in 1930, and that ring sat in a box for 80 years. **Amanda is telling me** about how she

is showing it, giddily and with joy, to those around her. And I find out, no kidding, that the day I chose to ask her to marry me is the anniversary of my dad's death. And I'm thinking about my dead grandmother, and my dead dad, dancing. The communion of Saints all in song. Life from death. Constant and endless rebirth. Your birth, our birth in Jesus, for the glory of God, today, this Advent, possible every day. Now that is good news. And we get to do it together.

Today after our service is our annual meeting. As it is chance more than anything else to have a conversation together about what we are bringing into being here in this church—church being, you. And at the core of this Advent for us as individuals, and as a parish, is what Isaiah finally lands on: “The grass withers, the flower fades, *but the word of our God will stand forever.*” Jesus as God's Word made flesh, born through each of us, is what Christmas is. We are already in it. Let us prepare the way of the Lord. **Amen.**