

Karen Hollis | Dec 6, 2020
Isaiah 40:1-11 | Mark 1:1-8
Advent 2

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Someone asked me the other day if I'm ready for Christmas . . . um . . . no . . . it's the first week of Advent, I've still got over 3 weeks! Advent is such a busy time in the church that my personal preparation doesn't usually get a lot of attention. But this year, we decided to get a tree – we got a great deal at a U-cut place in Nanaimo - and immediately all the childhood memories started coming back. Walking around the tree farm, considering the type of tree, height, shape; cutting down the tree, carrying it to the car, bringing it home, scratching our heads and saying, 'it wasn't this big at the tree farm!' Then the process of standing it up, making sure it's straight – from every angle – and letting the decorating commence! Doing this ritual not only gets our homes ready for Christmas, doing these things with our hands is a signal to us on the inside that we are in the season of preparation. The external and internal preparation are not linked because Jesus loves Christmas trees,

but because as humans, the things we do connect us to where we come from, to our roots and identity. The things we do with our hands also awaken us on the inside to the deeper truths of the season. The act of putting ornaments on the tree - perhaps even ornaments that belonged to our parents, ornaments made by children, grandchildren – touching these ornaments and putting them on the tree awakens something in us, it opens us to the mystery and the miracle of this season. The external and internal preparation are not separate, rather they work together.

John the Baptist also knows that the internal and external are connected when it comes to preparation; he brings together the inner work of seeking the deeper truth of our lives with cleansing the body in the Jordan. This practice prepares the people for something entirely new. The people go to the wilderness, away from the centre of power, and listen to John. They are motivated because they want a Messiah, an anointed one, like King David, to come and defeat the Roman Empire that continues to occupy and oppress them. Never did they imagine they would need to do inner work to prepare for the

Messiah to come.¹ They just want a warrior king to come and deliver them from their enemies.

John preaches that God is doing a new thing. The oppression you were raised with, that you build your life around will no longer have power, because God is coming to transform it. Living within new norms will not be automatic; it does require people to name for themselves how they have been living, the role God has had in their lives, who they have become because of the oppression they experience.

It's been a long time of waiting, as Isaiah says, and God is finally here . . . and because God is here, life will look different; mountains and valleys will be equalized, paths will be made straight, the practice of justice will be turned upside down. John comes to all of us to proclaim that right here in the world we know, the world that made us who we are, the world of our families, our histories, our traditions . . . right here, God comes and offers us new life, not to remove us from this life, but to transform this life, to find freedom within it, and receive it as a gift.

John invites all the people to participate . . . not just the wealthy or the powerful, but all the people; no one is excluded. God's promise is for everyone.

Theologian Richard Rohr wisely said, 'if this experience of heaven [on earth] is for one of us, it's for all of us.'²

These COVID times are strange; we experience the grief and loss and darkness alongside these surprising gifts that emerge out of nowhere. We continue to be in the wild space described by Sallie McFague . . . this space off centre from our normal view of the world, that gives us a window into who we are and how our lives are shaped. It is the perfect space for Advent, to be able to observe ourselves as we await Jesus' birth.

As we prepare for a very different Christmas, what do **you** see? What traditions have you relied on that this year are impossible? Who are you and your family without them? Which parts of your preparation seem more spacious this year? And which are more emotional or complex? What seems more precious or important? God shows up in the strangest places, comforting, challenging, accompanying . . . meeting us in the stuff of our lives, in the stuff of this unbelievably challenging year, in the physical movements of preparation . . . inviting

¹ Richard Rohr, lecture.

² Richard Rohr, lecture.

us into moments of reflection and wondering in us
what new life might look like.