

Advent 2B  
December 7, 2008  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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Mark 1:1-8

Imagine that you're sitting at home one evening. You're watching your favorite program on television when suddenly the picture cuts away and you hear these words...

“We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you this breaking news.”

Those are words that instantly cause a knot in my stomach. “What now?!?” I think.

Of course, today being December 7th many of us are thinking about Pearl Harbor Day, that day 67 years ago that still lives in infamy. There are still a few of our members who remember where they were when they heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, the attack that launched the U.S.'s involvement in World War II.

There are many similarly infamous days since then that remain in our memories, days we will never forget where we were when we heard the news. The day JFK was shot. The day the space shuttle Challenger exploded. And, of course, September 11, 2001. I still frequently find myself in conversations about where I was when I heard the news of the attacks on New York, the Pentagon, and the hijacked plane that went down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. I'm sure you do, too.

September 11th was my first official day of classes at the seminary. We'd just come out for our break from our first class. Many of us had gathered in the coffee shop when something on the television caught our attention. Slowly we drifted toward the TV. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. Several of us suggested that it was something like Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds," some bad joke that the networks were playing on us. The reality of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center had just begun to sink in when the second plane struck the second tower. We could no longer deny the reality of the tragedy that was unfolding before our eyes. This was no accident. This was a planned attack.

For days afterward countless Americans sat glued to their television sets, watching for any bit of breaking news. We began to get word that other terrorist attacks were possible. Where we lived, in the greater Washington, D.C., area, we were warned of a possible dirty bomb attack.

We were told to assemble emergency kits, kits containing emergency supplies of food, water, medicines, batteries, flashlights, a radio, blankets, and anything else that we might want to take with us should we have to flee from a dirty bomb attack. But we were also warned that any attack may come so suddenly that there would not be time to flee. We were instructed to prepare a supply of heavy plastic and sealing tape, so we could seal ourselves into our homes and try our best to keep out any potential contaminants.

My mother took these warnings very much to heart. Every day since September 2001 she has kept her emergency kit in the trunk of her car. She is ready to drive away at any time, as quickly as possible.

Once the original terror of 9/11 had passed, I began to think my mother was a bit, well, *kooky* for this constant stance of emergency preparedness. But within the past few months we've again heard increasing numbers of warnings of potential terrorist attacks. Just Thanksgiving week we were warned of a potential attack against the New York transit system, including the subways, Long Island Railroad, and New Jersey Transit. I'm beginning to think maybe Mom isn't so kooky after all.

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I think the message for us today is that we need to attend to the words of John the Baptist. What if we were to attend to them as seriously as we do those late-breaking news bulletins on the television? “Prepare the way of the Lord!” These words are meant to grab our attention, to snap us out of our complacency. John the Baptist is our early-warning system. His mission: To help people prepare for the advent of Jesus.

In the Gospel of Matthew John the Baptist says, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!”<sup>1</sup> John’s call is for us to examine ourselves, to turn from our sins, and to prepare for the coming of Jesus, the Son of God. His call is for repentance, a complete reorientation of life toward God. In Hebrew the word for this means to completely turn around. John is calling for us who may be going the wrong way to make a 180-degree turn – a U-turn – in our lives, to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

But unlike these late-breaking news bulletins we hear on the television, John’s words are not words of fear. These are words of good news. So often we hear only the first part of John’s news bulletin – “Repent!” – but we don’t attend properly to the good news that follows. His call to repentance is in preparation for the good news.

We *can* get too caught up in hearing the call to repentance. We either begin to immediately dwell on all the ways we have sinned, and fail to hear the rest of the message. Or, perhaps even our post-modern minds hear the call to repent, and begin to dwell on what an antiquated notion the concept of sin really is... and we fail to hear the rest of the message then, too.

It is most certainly important for us to hear the first part of John's message. I firmly reject the idea that sin is an antiquated notion. Sin is something that we need to seriously attend to. And it's funny – as in ironic, *not* laughable – that those very same people who claim that sin is an antiquated notion tend to be some of the worst sinners on the planet. All that any reasonable person needs to do is turn on the news to find out that sin is a very real thing, and it seems to be happening with increasing frequency.

But we also need to attend seriously to the good news that follows John the Baptist's call to repentance. Many thought John was the Messiah, but he declared to them, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is the good news that John proclaims: Jesus is coming! Make yourselves ready to receive the Son of God!

This is, indeed, a wonderful message. But I'm afraid that the message of Advent is all too often missed in this craziness that we now call the Christmas season. With all the busyness of shopping, decorating, cooking, cleaning, parties, what-have-you, that goes on this time of year, I wonder if we miss the meaning of Advent in our rush toward Christmas. Do we miss hearing the announcement of that late-breaking news bulletin?

Advent, for Christians, is intended to be a time of quiet, a time of introspection and examination, a time of repentance, and most of all, a time of joyful anticipation of He who comes to reconcile all of creation to God. When John the Baptist bursts on the scene with his late-breaking news bulletin, this isn't the sort of news that's supposed to cause knots in our stomachs. It's the sort of good news that brings us joy, and release. This good news of the coming of Christ is serious – as sin is a serious thing – but having examined ourselves and repented before God, this good news is intended to bring joy into the hearts of believers. The good news is that you *can* repent. The good news is that you can start over with a clean slate. The good news is that ours is a God who freely forgives repentant sinners.

“You know that Mark’s Gospel is notable because it has no account of the birth of Christ, no angels in the skies, no babe in the manger. The advent of Jesus is thus not some sort of strange and unexpected miracle of birth; it is an intrusion,” a late-breaking news bulletin invading the complacency of our everyday lives “that calls for radical turning and reorientation on our part. The Advent of Jesus, at least in the preaching of John the Baptist, is thus not only something that God is to do but also something that we are to do. We are to repent.”<sup>2</sup>

John said, “Make a straight road for the coming Messiah!” “That road, that journey back to God always begins with a U-turn.”<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

<1,447 words>

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<sup>1</sup> MT 3:2

<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, “Turnaround” in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36 No. 4 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2008), 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.