

“The Bungee Jumpers Advent Triptych”  
Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, and Mark 1:1-8  
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Several years ago, when I had the pleasure of working in a large Episcopal church in Pittsburgh, I frequently heard the Rector refer gratefully to the sermonic insights he had gained from the conversation at the Men’s Lectionary Bible Study each week. Each Thursday at 9:00 a.m., a group of about eight men or so would gather with the Rector and read and reflect on the passages that would be used in the Sunday service a few days later. The point of the group was not to supply the pastor with preaching fodder, but to prepare the hearts and minds of the participants to more fully engage the Scripture all week, but especially on Sunday in the context of the whole church gathered for the celebration of Word and Sacrament. That the Rector also gleaned something useful from his participation in the group was an added bonus which kept those men listening more closely each week to see if any of their words or ideas made it to the pulpit. I suppose a little ego can inspire even burgeoning Bible scholars to greater heights.

Little did your brothers and sisters in Christ who attend ECF’s Wednesday night Bible Study -- informally known as the Bungee Jumpers – little did the Bungee Jumpers know that, not only would their insights one day make it into the sermon, but that their very words themselves would be used against them, er, I mean, used to edify the rest of the church. You see, for the weeks of Advent, the

Bungee Jumpers have been studying the texts for the following Sunday and I have been carefully listening and taking notes. And last Wednesday, their efforts were so strong, it seemed like a waste to share them filtered by yours truly. And so I thought to bring them to you as unvarnished as possible so that you can receive their wisdom directly. Mind you, it is not as though they wrote out a completed message word for word, but they did fill out a worksheet that guided them through a sermon-writing-like process, so their thoughts were not so unorganized that I could not faithfully reproduce them in a more coherent form. And so, without further ado, let me introduce you to the authors, the preachers, of tonight's message: Kevin Ludeke, Amy Swartzbaugh, Bob Stickney, Christy Stickney, Scott Heringer, Ann-Marie Hosang Archer, Julia Wilson, Brian Wilson, Paul Bergsma and Barbara Bergsma. And for those of you who may be wondering why they self-identify as the Bungee Jumpers, let's just say that attending that Bible Study has its ups and downs.

One final word of preamble. Normally I preach on just one of the week's texts, with occasional references to the others. Tonight, we are going to be hearing the group's reflection on three of them, as a sort of Second Sunday of Advent package of thoughts on the week's theme of "Prepare." Those of you who have a familiarity with the Eastern Orthodox tradition of icons, may recognize the word triptych in the title of today's message. A triptych is a sort of three-in-one set of painted pictures called icons, usually hinged together like a little book. You open

the two outside panels to reveal the third hidden panel, and together, the three images tell a fuller story of the event represented. Tonight's sermon is a verbal triptych of sorts, as we'll take three short and intense looks at our call to prepare our hearts and minds for Christ's once and future coming.

Our first image of "prepare" comes from Isaiah 40:1-11 (Read). Well, imagine for a moment how you would feel if you were sentenced to prison, if you were sitting in prison, but you didn't have any idea when you were supposed to get out? Your sentence could be for life, your parole date could be next week, but there may not even be the possibility of parole before you die. You just don't know how long you are going to languish in that cell. Well, to a certain degree, that was the situation faced by God's people in Isaiah's time. They've sinned, been judged, then defeated, and finally carted off to Babylonia to serve out their penalty. They are serving their sentence for the sins they committed against God and one another, but there is really no release date set. And so they wonder, and lament, and try to hold out hope. But you can imagine how hard it would be to hold on to hope without a date to pin it on. But God is merciful, and so Isaiah is given this message to bring to the people in exile: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." With these words, God fixes a point of hope sometime in the future: "See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.” The only problem is that the day of the Lord’s coming is still unknown, and so the question that remains before them is this: If you don’t know the day of parole, how do you decide to live each day like you are going to be released tomorrow? How will they prepare, endure, persevere in that time, without the luxury or the incentive of the knowledge of just when it is coming?

Not surprisingly, God also provides them with wisdom for that unknown period of time: “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord will stand forever.” As hard as it will be, they are called to pin their hopes not on the things they can see before their eyes, or the hours and days they can count, but on the compassion God has sent in this message, and the way that God counts time. You see, God doesn’t mark time the same way we do, in the same, unexpected way that God doesn’t hold our sins against us in the way we might expect, or that we hold them against each other. You see, God’s time is graceful time, time to reflect on what endures, to care for those who suffer, to learn how not to get thrown in jail in the first place! The Bible uses two words to talk about time: *chronos*, which is the way to mark time on a clock, and *kairos*, which is that wonderful way God marks time. God’s challenge to those people in exile is to prepare for that day of liberty by living it according to *kairos* time, instead of marking off an X on the calendar every morning when they wake up. Will they fix their eyes on the tea kettle,

waiting interminably for it to boil? Or will they pass the time inviting guests to enjoy the tea that will be ready before they even know it while they are out calling the guests to the tea party? Such is the spirit of Advent waiting, and preparing, to live it according to God's desires for righteousness, and obedience, and the kind of compassion given to the exiles, and not the number of shopping days until Christmas.

Several centuries later, a similar dynamic faced the followers of Jesus, who had been promised Christ's return but without a date attached to it. This we read about in Second Peter 3:8-15a (Read). As many of us are a little too uncomfortably aware, the incidence of crime in the Costa Rica we know and love seems to be increasing every day. Many of you have witnessed, or even experienced, the snatch and grab bandits at the traffic lights on the Circumvalación, who watch for unsuspecting motorists who have left bags, purses, or laptops, on the passenger seat. A quick breaking of the window later, they are off with the goods, leaving behind a lot of broken glass but an even more shattered sense of personal safety and security. The suddenness of it is as astonishing as the lingering effects on our psyches, as we change our routines, or plot revenge, or add more security features to our homes. This kind of lurking and uncertain threat makes us act in ways we'd rather not.

Using a metaphor then that may hit a little too close to home for us, Peter writes about the lurking and uncertain threat, so to speak, of Christ's return, and

how we might choose to live that time as well. “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” Yikes! Very scary stuff, even scarier than a snatch and grab, or at least it should be. The coming of the Lord will be like a holy break-in, something we will never quite be prepared for, but that ironically, we should be looking forward too. But once again, God’s timetable doesn’t always match our own, and the promise doesn’t come with a date attached. And so in Peter’s time, and in various Christian communities of the New Testament, there was this not-always-so-creative tension about Christ’s return. Most saw it as imminent, but all saw that it was not as imminent as they hoped. Years, and even decades passed since the promise, and Jesus’ words that those who heard his words would not die before he came again were beginning to cause a little dissent in the ranks. And so developed two camps, if you will, two ways of living which we probably still often represent today. On the one hand were, and are, those with the human tendency to react to such uncertainty by denying the future and its implications. There is then no urgency, no need to pay attention to our preparation to meet our Maker face to face. We can do what we want because nobody seems to be watching. It becomes easier to avoid cultivating our righteousness and obedience and compassion, when it doesn’t seem like it will ever be required of us. But wouldn’t you want it if the day does come like a thief in the night?

At the other end of the spectrum were, and are, those for whom the promised impending return causes a sort of paralyzing fear, and all-consuming anticipation that warps our perspective on the present. To this way of thinking, all that is needed is a constant vigilance, since it could happen at any time. Not surprisingly, this leads to a sort of hyper-righteousness that focuses primarily on personal readiness, kind of like stocking up a spiritual Cold War-era bomb shelter to survive the fallout of the Lord's coming. The urgency of other people's knowledge of Christ overwhelms the pace of God's calling of them. We feel responsible for the salvation of others, if we think of them at all in our hyper-preparedness. But what about the sheep and the goats, and our call to the "least of these?"

Once again, not surprisingly, we learn that neither of these human extremes are particularly helpful, and Peter reminds us both that holiness and godliness are extremely important, but also that our God is a patient God, a God who is willing to wait so that as many people as possible may come to repentance. He gives then a strong message about the future, but one with urgent implications for today. We await the holy break-in, but we can await it in peace, and so Paul says, "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of the Lord as salvation." We will not speed the Lord's coming either by worry or by neglect of the gift of grace we have received in Jesus Christ. As we prepare this Advent, may we find that peace.

The final panel of our triptych comes in the form of John the Baptist, as he is described by Mark. (Read Mark 1:1-8). Looking forward to the first coming of Christ, John is in the desert, the wilderness, recalling the words of Isaiah, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Get ready people, for something big is about to happen. Of course, that something big is not rushing to the Christmas tree on Christmas morning to unwrap gifts, but rather the Christ child himself who was born to save us. The truth is, of course, that we frequently spend our month of December getting ready more for Christmas morning, than for Christ himself. There is much to be enjoyed about the customs that have developed around Christmas, and far be it from us to begrudge anyone their form of celebrating the season. That being said, it can be difficult to focus on Jesus for all of the distractions of the Christmas season. In a showdown between Santa and Jesus, the guy in the red suit usually wins, perhaps because Madison Avenue has the elf’s back, and all Jesus has is the church.

The witness of John the Baptist, however, offers us some insight on this struggle to prepare for the right thing. His life, as strange as it may sound to us, holds some clues for Advent, especially when held up to how we often find ourselves during December. See if any of this sounds familiar: making shopping lists and consulting one’s day planner to see when we can squeeze in one more holiday event; Fretting over just the right gift, and eating and drinking too much; shopping on the so-called Black Friday and trying to find a parking place at the

mall, and maybe even trampling a Wal-mart employee to death in the stampede to get a big discount on a plasma television; and finally, especially as children, trying to be good to avoid getting a lump of coal in our stocking. Now maybe you have never done any of things, and God bless you if you haven't. But for the rest of us who have been caught up in all of this, here is how John the Baptist spent time preparing for the coming of Christ.

Instead of relying on his lists and day planners, John consulted the prophet Isaiah, lifting up the promises of liberty for the captives and the coming of the Lord's anointed. Instead of hoarding and stressing and over-indulging, John lived in the desert eating locust and wild honey. Instead of encouraging the pursuit of the perfect gift, John encouraged the people to come to the same desert in which he was waiting for Christ. And instead of trying to shape the behavior of others with promises of rewards, John called them to prepare themselves by repentance to receive life itself. John used his time of preparation very differently, and calls us to the same kind of waiting this Advent. But most of all, John seems to have been able to imagine being face to face with Christ, and having him ask, "What have you done with the time I have given you. What have you done to prepare the way for my arrival?" Is that a conversation we can imagine this Advent? Amen.