

For the last few weeks, at our house, we have been watching A LOT of episodes of the *British Baking Show*. If you've never seen it, they get a group of twelve talented amateur bakers who spend ten successive weekends baking an incredible variety of items. Bread, cookies, cakes. Some of the things they make are outstanding and some are incredible failures. Katie and I have agreed that watching the program makes us want to bake, but on the other hand, I've had my own baking fails.

A few years ago, I found myself on Christmas Day looking around our living room in a state of absolute panic. The tree was up, but if it hadn't been one of those pre-lit artificial trees, it would have been naked of all decoration.

We had company coming but none of the household preparations happened until after we opened our presents. I cooked. Our daughter Katie vacuumed and dusted. Matt picked up stuff and tried to get some laundry done before our dinner guests arrived. It was a domestic flurry of getting ready, but some things just didn't work out the way that I had plan. In particular, the dessert.

I had promised Katie I would make a French Silk chocolate pie for Christmas Day. I have made much more complicated desserts, so I wasn't worried about it at all. And yet from the very start, things went wrong. I baked the pie crust and it slid down the sides of the pie pan and puffed up into a great big round blob of pastry. I scraped it out and made a second crust, which was almost as bad as the first. So in the trash it went. On the third try, I finally had success and so it was time to make the chocolate custard. I followed all the steps but it was awful.

I found a different recipe and made a second custard, but it just wouldn't set up and so I ended up with chocolate soup pie. I was so frustrated. It had been a really challenging December but I'd done the best I could to make our Christmas celebration joyful. I had fussed and fiddled and planned and plotted. And now the stupid pie was not coming together and I just wanted to scream.

We ended up having ice cream for dessert. And when the dishes were done, the kids went off to do their thing and the adults snuggled in to watch some football.

Christmas Day was over.

And I felt like I'd missed it.

+ + +

So are you making preparations for Christmas? During this first week of Advent were there things that made you feel like Christmas is coming? Was it running all over to find the right present? Or standing in line at the post office to get your packages sent on time? Is your house clean? Have you got cookies made and ready to serve?

The radio and television are filled with advertisements for toys and clothes and cars and gadgets. It is so easy to get caught up in thinking this is what Christmas is all about. That anxious, noodling feeling that things need to be done. Done right and done quickly!

How did it get like that?

Finding the best gift, making the perfect pie, having a tree that would make Martha Stewart proud- do any of those things really proclaim the good news of Christmas? We exhaust ourselves for the better part of a month, but are we really preparing to celebrate the good news of Jesus' birth? And if folks who go to church every Sunday can get distracted by the hustle and bustle that happens each December, what does it feel like for people who are doing all that same hurrying and **don't** have God's love at the center of their celebration?

+ + +

In our gospel today we are told that John the Baptist brought a divine message to all who could hear. He called for people to change their lives for the forgiveness of sins.

“Prepare for God’s arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

Every ditch will be filled in,

Every bump smoothed out,

The detours straightened out,

All the ruts paved over.

Because Everyone will be there to see

The parade of God’s salvation.”

That’s the kind of preparation we are called to today. Serious construction. Major roadwork. And it certainly ought to be more important than a clean house or a dazzlingly decorated tree

We have the incredible gift of being able to celebrate that *the Word became flesh and lived among us*. So how do we get ready? I am not going to argue against cleaning and decorating and buying lovely gifts for caring people, but shouldn’t there be more to our preparations?

Father John Foley describes it this way.

“Christ is gestating right now in our hearts, just as you and I did in our mothers’ wombs. Like a mom, we have to stretch! His birth will not make the world pleasant and polite, but will connect it at its very roots with the mysterious profundity of God.

“Will you let him be born in you this year, a little more than in the past? Are you willing to let your insides stretch wider than ever before and so make room? This is the meaning of Advent.

“Prepare the way of the Lord” inside yourself.”

John the Baptist’s call to get ready is a hopeful and necessary message for us today. It doesn’t take much effort to imagine our world as a desert. Scarcity, isolation, hunger, and violence seem to be present in every corner of the world. The pain and injustice around us can make us wonder whether God is at work in this wilderness. But Luke reminds us in this story and throughout his account of the gospel, that the wilderness is precisely where God provides what we need. This is where we meet God. These are the places Christ calls us to go, so that we can join in crying out from the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

+ + +

I was watching *Dr. Strange* last night. It’s a film that has nothing to do with Advent or Christmas, but at a point when the hero has to decide what to do - serve his own needs or serve the needs of others so that they will think he’s a hero - his mentor says, “it’s not about you.” It never was. It was dialogue worth remembering.

There are wilderness places all around us – in the lives of people we know. In the hearts of people we love. In the daily existence of so many who need to know that God is with them and no matter how deserted they may feel, God is always going to be with them. That is a message that we can share. Again and again and again.

Getting ready for Christmas – celebrating Advent – is not about us. It’s about sharing a message of hope with people who need that good news. It’s about God and how God’s love can be proclaimed.

God’s blessing on your Advent!

Poem by J. Janda

Neither the pearl
nor the diamond
is diminished
by day or night
nor graced through
ownership
nor changed by price
purity is its
birthright
which craft
cannot create
only cherish
or destroy

That Christmas night, as we sat in the living room not eating pie- Matt started to tell our friend Wil how glad he was that she had been able to join us for Christmas. And in that moment, I knew it didn't matter that the house didn't look perfect or that the tree had no ornaments. It didn't matter that there wasn't a fancy dessert.

The best part of Christmas was being able to celebrate God's love.

We were together! And as good as it felt to be together as friends - what made it even better was that our time together was centered on the belief that at Christmas, God came to be with us. In person. In human form.