

For most of my adult life, I haven't thought twice about having people over to my home when there wasn't much time to prepare. A friend is swinging through the neighborhood and wants to drop off a book she borrowed? No problem. Pop in, and stay for a cup of coffee. Dan's co-worker is dropping him off and wants to say hi for a few moments? Of course! Come right in.

But now, we have a child in our home. And the prospect of people coming over without a lot of lead-time to *prepare* is totally, utterly different.

Now, the impending arrival of someone coming into our home strikes minor panic into my heart because there is more to do to prepare our house to receive them. I jump into a scurry of activity, a sort of clean-up dance: picking up baby sweaters cast off after walks; putting away shoes thrown aside in an attempt to answer a crying baby faster; tidying up a wide assortment of burp clothes and teethingers and swaddles that, despite *all having assigned locations to be put away*, have somehow become strewn around at least three rooms.

This scattered debris, I realize, is the just result of our *simply living*—I don't notice it all in our daily routine, but when someone is coming over, the mess becomes more pronounced, and sticks out.

It seems that you can't see how you really live until you prepare for someone else to come...

“Prepare” is John the Baptist's cry at the beginning of Mark's gospel and our theme for this morning. And for the people going out into the wilderness

where John is, “Prepare” has taken on a whole new meaning now that the Son of God is on the way. These Judeans are seeking a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They are doing the clean-up dance around the rooms of their hearts, picking up the broken pieces of their sins that have become strewn about from *just living*. They are seeking a dip in the Jordan for forgiveness as a way to cleaning up the daily mess.

Their dip in the Jordan offers a sense of newness, perhaps not unlike, I imagine, the feeling after finally wiping the dinner table clean when it's lain dirty with crumbs for days, the kind of refreshment felt after you clean that one item or area you've been putting off but finally took time to wash. (*You know that spot or thing I'm talking about.*)

To offer us a similar chance to prepare, to help us clean up and receive spiritual refreshment the church's season of Advent comes around once a year. And the Advent liturgy leads us through the clean-up dance.

We pause for the Confession at the beginning of worship, a time to consider all the broken pieces strewn around by our simply living. We see the kindness to a stranger we cast off in a rush to serve ourselves. We sort through the clutter of our anxieties, our frustrations, and the ways we refuse to trust God. We collect the crumbs of angry words uttered, the litter of mean things thought about others, and the debris of uncharitable actions towards neighbors who we know need our help.

If the Confession and Forgiveness is when we sweep out the house and wipe the table, then Lighting the Advent Wreath is when we make a

comfortable place for the Spirit to sit. No guest likes to enter a dark room so by drawing more light into this space, we pause to ask God to make our hearts a more habitable place for the Spirit to dwell.

The readings and sermon remind us of all the guests who have come before us and of the stories they shared about God. Perhaps a way of putting out place cards, the readings help us see our story in God's story, our clean-up dance set within the larger choreography of God's ballet of deliverance and mercy.

Then, in Communion, we focus on those gathered. The meal is our time of fellowship, our time to get up from our seats and mingle with other guests around the room, our time to look one another in the eye and say, "This is for you!" our time to recognize the paradox that the Guest of Honor for whom we were preparing has actually been the Host all along.

And after the meal, especially in Advent, we pause for silence. We pause to be quiet after Holy Communion, so that in the busiest of cultural, temporal seasons, we may be still and revel in the process of preparing for and receiving and knowing God.

Through this clean-up dance, through this process of preparation, we come enjoy peace and know comfort. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." And for Jerusalem and its prophet Isaiah, arriving at this comfort began by acknowledging the consequences of their sin.

And then came the reminder of Lord God's promise to gather the scattered lambs and feed the flock.

And so it is for us: Arriving at the comfort of God begins by owning up to the reality of our sins: by admitting that our lives get messy and disordered simply by living; then hearing how we are forgiven and recipients of God's promise; then seeing how a place has been set for us, we leave refreshed and prepared.

In our Advent worship here we prepare our hearts and minds and spirits to meet Christ out there, in the world. Because that's where Christ will come to meet us: not only here in church, but also in the places that need cleaning and wiping and healing and mercy, into the lives which we simply live.

Yes, Advent helps us to see how to really live now that we're preparing for the Son of God to come.

AMEN.

Rev. Kathryn L. Pocalyko
Lutheran Church of Our Saviour
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Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

