

Down by the River - Preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan
Sunday, December 6, 2020 - 2Advent
St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Exactly one year ago today, Sarah Bushman and I made a trip to Brownsville with a group of other people to help feed asylum-seeking families. These families were living in tents on the Mexican side of the border awaiting ever-decreasing chances for a new life on the American side of the Rio Grande. Many of you supported that trip with your prayers and your financial contributions, so I felt like Sarah and I were there on your behalf, that we were all called to the river together.

What we encountered there was heartbreaking and humbling - it was painful seeing people who had already been through trauma living in such desperate circumstances and it was humbling to realize how much they were willing to endure to have even a fraction of what I have in my daily life.

It was also thrilling in a way, to be at the scene where an important event was unfolding, where a major debate in our nation - and the world really - was played out before our eyes.

It was hopeful - everyone in that camp by the river had hope, no one started the journey there without believing it was possible for everyone there to have a better life. The families felt hope and so did all of us there to help.

Sarah and I helped teach a couple of the classes at the camp school and the kids were so proud to practice their English with us and show us how they could solve math problems.

I saved some of the drawings they made. Children who had walked for hundreds of miles and faced armed threats drew pictures of houses with their parents and siblings. They drew hearts and flowers and rainbows. These children had hope.

They knew that a better life was possible and they had the capacity to hope for it. So did their families - or else they would not have been gathered there by the river.

Those of us there to help and those living in the camp shared a lot of the feelings of heartbreak, humility, excitement, and hope. But there was one feeling that I think was only felt by those of us there to serve food and teach for a day. It was a feeling of un-

worthiness or even culpability, that we were not just there to make ourselves or all those refugees feel better, we were being held accountable.

We were being called to repentance.

That trip to the river happened during Advent last year. A year later, we've all entered that season again with anticipation and preparation for the coming of Christ. It is a time many of us focus on the miracle of families. Seeing families living in tents, I couldn't help thinking about Mary and Joseph and Jesus getting by in less than perfect circumstances.

Advent is a time of counting days and changing colors and decorating our homes - not necessarily in a frivolous way. These outward changes can be a sign of how we are preparing inwardly for Christmas.

And Advent is also a time for repentance. Sometimes that is easy to forget, or perhaps easy to skip over. It can be hard to reconcile all the anticipation and preparation and hope of Advent with penitence. Remembering and confessing our sins is not generally our getting-ready-for-Christmas to-do list. We don't usually hear a call to repent as Good News. And yet, here in the Gospel reading from Mark today, the 2nd Sunday in Advent, is a call to repentance.

This Gospel invites us to listen to the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ,
But it doesn't tell the story of Gabriel appearing to Mary
Or about a baby in a manger
It doesn't start with Jesus at all.

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ is
An invitation to the edge of a river
And a call to repentance.

The good news starts with repentance. Why is this good news?

Well, for one thing, it is clear that repentance is part of what it takes to prepare for the coming of Christ. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins - and people from the whole Judean countryside were eager to accept that invitation. And John was clear - getting baptized was not an end in itself, it was preparation for the one who was coming after him, Jesus. So one way repentance is good news is that without it we aren't ready for Christ to enter our lives.

There is something else, though. Repentance comes with a sense of anticipation and hope - which are feelings we very much associate with Advent.

I'll admit, repentance also comes with dread and embarrassment and sorrow. It is never easy or fun to really see the ways your life has turned away from God. And not just your own individual life and choices, but life all around you. My goodness, even on our best days, it is hard to escape the injustices all around us, to feel a little guilty for having an easier time than so many other people in the world.

Or perhaps it feels futile because while you can try to turn your life around and work hard to make the world a better place, there are so many ways the sins of the community at large, the nation as a whole, are making it seem impossible to make things better. To make things right. It's righteousness, after all, that we seek through repentance. Setting things right with God.

Repentance isn't mostly about dread and embarrassment and sorrow, though. And it isn't an exercise in futility. Imagine if you knew your life was going in the wrong direction, that the world around you was dominated by injustices that could not be set straight. It would be a hopeless situation. There would be no reason to confess the wrong. No reason to try making things better. There would be no hope.

Repentance requires hope of forgiveness and restoration and reunion with God. We repent because God has promised that sin can be overcome, we can turn our lives around, and during Advent especially we remember that God sent a savior to help us do just that. We can repent because we know it is possible for things to change, we do not have to be stuck in "un-rightness." We don't have to be stuck in sin.

In Advent, we are anticipating and preparing for a SAVIOR. Because we need saving. And the fact that we CAN BE SAVED is very good news! It is the best news!

What struck me most when I was at the Rio Grande last year, was seeing people who had flocked to that river because they had hope. Their hope was slim and it required a lot of sacrifice. But no one could have made the journey there without hope. That was true of the families who left homes and everything familiar and faced terrifying violence. It was equally true of those of us who were called to the river to feed them - they showed us the enormous brokenness of the world, their poverty and vulnerability revealed to our own sin to us. And we all hoped for right-ness.

The hope we experienced at the Rio Grande last year is the kind of hope that John kindled in the people he baptized at the river in the wilderness. It is the kind of hope

that John invites us to feel as we anticipate forgiveness of our sins. It is the kind of hope that God promised long ago and promises still. It is the hope that comes in Jesus.

We have good reason to repent. Not just because we live in a world of sin, but because there is hope of setting things right. In a way, we are always at a river bank. Sometimes we are the ones seeking forgiveness, sometimes we are calling others to join us.

As we all prepare for what is surely one of the strangest Christmases on record, I invite you to imagine yourself joining John the baptizer at the river in the wilderness, and joining the families who are still camping at the river that divides Mexico and the United States. Remember why we need Christ to come in the first place. The good news is, you have every reason to hope.

Amen.