

**St. Andrew's Cathedral**  
Jackson, Mississippi  
Sermon for December 9, 2018 ~ Advent2C  
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

A member of a former congregation once asked me, "Why do we have to start the church year with Advent? Why not just start with Christmas?" My answer was a bit of a surprise to her. "For the same reason Handel had." "I don't understand," she said. So, I continued, "When you set out to tell a story, it is best to start at the beginning. Handel's great oratorio, *Messiah*, tells the story of Christ. The somber opening chords, place us in the darkness of exile. Then, the tenor comes in singing the words of the exilic prophet, Isaiah, in the context of the message of John the Baptist, 'There's a voice in the wilderness crying, prepare ye the way of the Lord.'" "And," I said, "Handel was telling the story the same way the writers of the four Gospels did. None of *them* started with Christmas, either. They all begin with the Baptizer out in the wilderness, calling God's people to prepare, bearing witness to the light that was coming to shatter the darkness of their bewilderment."

To get the story straight, we have to start at the beginning. And the beginning of the story of God's Messiah, is an acknowledgement of how things had been up until the time of his birth and the promise that God would some day put his finishing touches on his creation.

**God is moving in our direction.** As I said, the story of God's Messiah begins in the days after the Israelites were defeated by the Babylonians and many were carried into exile. It was a time of darkness and mourning because they were cut off from the Promised Land and from their temple which was the center of their worship. Back in the days of the Babylonian empire, when a monarch traveled through his dominions in his slow and simply constructed chariot, engineer soldiers known as sappers went ahead virtually in order to build the road the king had to travel. They had to level the hillocks and build up the ditches and fill in the holes so that the royal chariot might make some kind of speed. The prophet Isaiah, who brought the word of hope that God would come to the rescue of his people, used the imagery of road construction to emphasize the point that God's approach was underway. To prepare literally means to push obstacles out of the way. Make his paths straight means "no detours." The result of all this road building was that the King would get through!

Have you ever been away from home and become lost? I have. What a feeling of despair can come over you when that happens. I had a conversation yesterday about getting lost in a department store. I went shopping with my mother and thought it would be cool to crawl up under a big round clothes rack where nobody could see me. When I emerged and couldn't see my mother, it was much less cool. On another occasion when I was a child, I wandered down the street and became lost. A neighbor recognized me and took me inside her house. She called my mother and my mother said, "Tell him I'm coming to get him."

John the Baptist, for the Gospel writers, becomes a kind of sapper, intent upon preparing the royal highway for God who is moving in our direction. He came then and his message is repeated in this and every Advent, at the beginning of the story, "Tell my people I am coming to get them." This God bulldozes a way thru the wilderness to get to us because we can't get to him. Wherever you look into your life and find that feeling of exile, lostness, and darkness, lift up your heads! God knows where you are and is moving in your direction even now.

**God is leading us out of our wilderness and toward someplace called "home."** What is your wilderness like? Wilderness is not really a place; it's a state of mind, a metaphor to describe a terrifying situation where wild beasts lurk. There are no clear paths, and chaos, temptation and bewilderment reign. It is the

address where many of us live. Some, of course, deny it. Just as some Jews tried to assimilate themselves into the values of the Babylonian empire, so some today look upon our culture and sense no abrasion between cultural values and gospel values. But, believe, there is always some part of us out in the wilderness, cut off from someplace best described as “home.” God is coming, daily, to lead us out and lead us home.

In 1995, I found myself in a vocational dilemma. I felt drawn from the Church in which I grew up and where I had served in Holy Orders for over twenty years to this Church, The Episcopal Church. As I began moving in that direction, in December of that year, I had phone conversations with two friends who are Episcopal Priests. They lived in different parts of the country and didn't know one another. At the end of each conversation, each one said to me, “Welcome home, Ron.” For twenty-three years, with each step, in Texas, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Wyoming, Colorado, and now Mississippi, I have felt more and more “at home.” That is in part due to the resonance of the liturgy and the beautiful churches I have served, but most of all because of people like you whom God has put into my life. It is good to be found and led to someplace called, “home.”

The message of the Prophets and the Baptizer is that God is leading us out of our wilderness and toward someplace called, “home.”

**God is moving all things toward completion when God will apply the finishing touches.** I know how easy it is to look at our wilderness and ask, “where is the God of justice? What is God doing? Is anything really getting any better?” The Jews must have asked that question a million times there in exile. But there is the witness of scripture and millions of lives who have caught a glimpse of how God is continually moving his creation toward completion, wholeness, and fulfillment of all his divine plans. Maybe it is so hard for us to recognize because it is such an intricate and complex thing that only God is able to really see how it is going.

Paul's words to the Philippians speak to such questions as these. “I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of the Lord Jesus.” And, the Baptizer recalls the words of the Prophet Isaiah to speak of God's finishing touches in this way: “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” God is moving all things toward completion. Advent is about remembering that and preparing the way for that to happen – in our world, our church, our hearts.

When Charles Kettering was president of General Motors he used to drive every weekend from Detroit to his home in Dayton, Ohio. One weekend, he invited an associate to make the trip with him. The associate asked how long the drive would be and Kettering said, “four and one-half hours.” The associate said it would take much longer than that and they argued about it, continuing the argument as they drove. They arrived just as Kettering said they would, in four and one-half hours. The associate said, “well no wonder you can do it. You didn't stay on Route 25!” His tone of voice seemed to say that no driver in his right mind would leave the highway marked in red on the map. Kettering took the blue roads, the more direct way.

Like Mr. Kettering's associate, we are map-wise but life-foolish. But God is not. God is not lost and. God is coming to us; coming to lead us out of whatever wilderness we're in and toward someplace called “home.” And, God is coming to move all things to completion. That is the divine plan. That is the unbreakable promise. And, even when we can't see how and when, we can have confidence that our God is coming over a highway that is the most correct and the most direct – with hills leveled, valleys filled in, and crooked ways straightened out – to bring all creation, including you and me, to completion, and to put his finishing touches on everything! Let us take time this Advent, at the beginning of the story of our Messiah, to prepare the way?