

I couldn't decide whether to call this week's theme "Live Humbly" or "Live Simply." What I'd prefer to either of those is "Live Level" or "Live Clear." That's what John the Baptist models for us – clarity and laser-like focus. He is the essence of humility, allowing himself to become transparent in the service of the mission to which he was called.

John had a single-mindedness that we might mistake for madness or fanaticism. They did not think him mad in his own day – they did not know what to make of him. But he fascinated them, and he rattled their cages, as he does ours, if we will pay attention. And we should pay attention, for we all share the mission of John the Baptist – to prepare the way for Jesus coming into the life of this world.

John's mission was announced even before his birth, by the angel Gabriel telling his father Zechariah in the temple:
He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, ...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

To make ready a people prepared for the Lord. That's our calling, and invitation, to help people get ready for the life of God bursting, oozing into their lives. We are to carry God's contagious love, to prepare people to receive Christ. God's mission is to reclaim, restore and renew all things to wholeness in Christ, God invites us to participate in that reclaiming, restoring, renewing. So we too need to learn how to live humbly, simply, focused, making God known. For many of us, that's going to take some work, because friends, our lives are cluttered. Our minds are cluttered. Our hearts are cluttered.

Advent invites us to a massive de-cluttering. Advent invites us to follow John out to desert, to the wilderness, where things are stripped down so we can see what really matters, where we can encounter our most essential selves, and where we might just encounter God. Wilderness can suggest a stark emptiness. It can also invoke chaos, lack of order. Perhaps preparing a way for God in our wilderness means locating the wild, untamed places within ourselves, our most essential "me-ness."

We may be quite cut off from our true selves, so distracted by our tasks and data, our commitments and the priorities others impose upon us, that we haven't dealt with or dwelt in our own wilderness for quite some time. Advent offers a particular invitation to do that – to lean into spiritual practices that connect us to God and to ourselves; to rediscover the desert within and prepare the highway for God's presence to enter our lives with more fullness.

Wilderness times sometimes happen to us, such as illness, or job loss, or the trauma like the one we're all enduring this year.

We can also choose wilderness time, and Advent is a great time for that.

How do we go about seeking clarity and making the way for God?

In part by welcoming that clarity into our own lives.

By examining our clutter, assessing our priorities and making different choices, choices that lead to more health and freedom for us and for our families; choices that put God's claims above the claims of the world.

It's the "Marie Kondo-izing" of our lives, if you will, not only our closets and kitchen junk drawers. Marie Kondo is a rare person whose name is now a verb. Her 2011 book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (which I have not read...), famously recommended this rubric for discerning what stays and what gets tossed: Does this spark joy? Does this picture I've never put up spark joy?

Does this T-shirt from a rock concert I went to in 1987 still spark joy in me?

We might apply that criterion to the non-material aspects of our lives –

Does this relationship spark joy? If it's one we've made a commitment to, we don't decide to toss it, but maybe to address the patterns that do not spark joy.

Does this job, this way of getting my news, this way of exercising and eating –

Do these spark joy, give life? It's a worthy exercise.

This week's Advent Playlist gives you some ways to think that through.

Our Advent readings paint a vision of a leveling, evening out the highs and lows.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Isaiah describes a highway as a place for God to draw near to God's people – it's a highway for God. We might even call it a runway.

A meeting place for God and for an estranged and exiled humanity

to return home – that is the Church at its best. A meeting place for God

and those beloved of God, especially those who do not feel very beloved.

The low will be lifted up, and the high will be brought down to earth.

Creating a level road on which God and people can meet up has personal dimensions. Helping addicts gain sobriety, and providing support and help for the Covid-afflicted, or people facing mental illness, is leveling activity. This work has a global dimension – it is the work of racial justice and equity. It has a political dimension, bringing down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, as the Song of Mary goes. It has a local dimension – it is the work of reaching out in love with food and care. It has a personal dimension – it is the work of fostering emotional equilibrium. And of course it has a spiritual dimension – reconciling the world to God, participating in God’s mission to reclaim, restore and renew all of creation to wholeness.

How do we make *the uneven ground level, and the rough places a plain?*
How do we create on-ramps into the Life of God for people who don’t feel they belong in our pretty churches?
How do we reach them online, in digital space?

It is Jesus who is coming down that highway into the lives of God’s beloved; our job is to invite people onto the road to meet him, to make the introductions, and then get out of the way. The place where God and humanity meet is called grace – it is a place of love without condition, of mercy beyond forgiveness.

That’s what this road is for – for God and humanity to meet in reconciling love. That’s what it means to be God’s road crew – to facilitate those connections, to be what our Presiding Bishop calls “The Jesus Movement.”

And there’s a promise attached to the outcome:
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Imagine, as we de-clutter our lives, as we de-clutter our spirits, more of God’s glory is revealed through us!
And all people shall see it together.

Amen.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

`Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."