

With Thanksgiving now behind us, it is time, maybe even past time, to get ready for Christmas in earnest. Given that today is the Feast of St. Nicholas, this may be the right opportunity to get gifts for loved ones. If you're like me and have family or close friends at a distance, you may already be experiencing a mild form of panic in the selection of that perfect gift and getting it shipped so that it arrives on time.

You may be expecting over night guests, to include in-laws so the house needs to be in ship shape. The holidays tend to lend themselves to heightened expectations, so ordinary cleaning and straightening up is insufficient. You cast a gaze at the whole house, looking at it with new eyes, as if seeing it for the first time, and notice what has been overlooked or ignored. Those things must now be addressed. In Nina's and my case, for instance, we really need to rehang the towel rack in the powder room. At the very least, we need to get those cute, holiday, disposable toilettes at Bed, Bath and Beyond so our guests can dry their hands.

Nina and I enjoy entertaining and ordinarily, we both can find better things to do with our time than housework. So when we do entertain, we get very intentional about what we need to accomplish to get the house ready. As we critically look around any given room, we adapt the popular

saying of a decade ago, “What would Jesus do?” to “What would Jane toss?” so that we know what we need to accomplish. Our friend Jane does not tolerate clutter and has nothing needless in her house. So we try and adopt her mentality as we assess each room.

If this is a tactic that might work for you, you might think to yourself, “what would Kae Clark toss?” Even better, you might talk to Kae about how she approaches the tasks of organization for her clients. She has a form that each client fills out to ascertain what works for them and what doesn’t work for them, as well as what the client hopes to accomplish. “To get organized” is not an acceptable response, the answer must address for what purpose the client wants to get organized. It must be a concrete, achievable desire or goal.

Now lest you are beginning to think that this sermon is devolving into a *Hints from Heloise* or a Martha Stewart moment, let me hasten to assure you that there is link between our preparing for Christmas and our Gospel lesson. John the Baptist is calling. He is calling each of us to provide as much intentionally to the impending Jesus event as we do to the celebration of the holiday that commemorates his birth.

John's call is insistent and urgent. We are meant to pay attention, to give heed, to pause and reflect. In the spirit filled utterance of John's father, Zechariah that we recited together a few moments ago, we are being reminded that God is setting us free, that God shows us his mercy, that we are being saved from our enemies, and that we are to keep God's covenant. John is calling us to be mindful that God's mercy is always available for us to accept. In God's mercy, forgiveness is always assured. Our failings, our sins if you will - God let's go of them, <poof> they are vanished. Being assured of forgiveness, we have no need of defensiveness or to protect our ego. We can be completely vulnerable knowing that God will not hurt or shame us in the midst of our failures. In paying attention to this moment, forgiveness is not a hard thing to ask for. The invitation to turn toward God is meant to be the easiest thing in the world to accept.

John calls us to pay attention, to prepare for God's way by examining our lives and our values and our priorities. In his gospel, Luke is pointing out to us that God is active in history, that there is an interplay between the human and the divine, that God chooses ordinary people from nowhere to fulfill His purposes in extraordinary ways, everywhere. In light of the mass

shootings in San Bernadino and Colorado Springs, (and according to social media, mass shootings are nearly an every day occurrence here in the United States,) this is Good News to me. There's going to be an ordinary person, from somewhere nobody's ever heard of, who will carry out God's purposes in dealing with gun violence in our country. Perhaps even someone sitting in this church. Maybe me. I don't know, but what I do know is that John is calling us to look at our structures and systems and peoples of the world in new and different ways, with God as our lens as we focus on what we are to do in response to God's prevailing mercy and love for us.

Right now in the life of our parish, we are being lead to the type of intentionally that John the Baptist is telling us we must undertake to live into God's reign. With the Vestry's decision to explore further what a deliberate relationship with St. George's would look like, we are experiencing a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty. Yet this anxiety and uncertainty is producing clear desires of what we don't want or don't want to happen as well as focusing on what we do want and hope to have happen. Our corporate values and priorities are being re-examined. Do they still fit and work for us? If not, what does? This idea of yoking our two parishes

together forces an examination of our structures and systems, where do they work? Where are they failing? Is this option going to enhance what works and mitigates what doesn't work? How will this option fulfill our deep desire for stability? What is our mission and is everything we do reflective of our mission as part of the Body of Christ? Do the missions of the two churches overlap? Is this even a good option for being the Episcopal expression of Christianity right here, right now? And where do we see God in all of this? While there are no definitive answers as yet, these are the right questions to be asking. These are questions that lead us beyond just worrying about being financially solvent in the long term, these are questions whose answers should be leading us further into the realization of God's Kingdom - not as some pie in the sky nicety, but as a concrete reality right here in southern Maryland.

Someone recently said to me that this is the wrong time to be talking about this, to be taking intentional steps toward our future because it's Christmas and people are busy. Yes, this is true that people are busy and yet this is Advent and is what John the Baptist is calling us to do. We are answering the call. And we will keep praying that we are being lead to right decisions. As unsettling as this process is, I am very excited about the

possibilities of a renewed sense of mission and a renewed sense of community because we are responding to John's call, to God's invitation of mercy *intentionally*, with the same determination and focus and preparation that we give to Christmas. I hope you too will *intentionally* engage the possibilities for a vibrant, Christ filled community devoted to the least of our brothers and sisters right here in this place with the same excitement as you had as an eight year old, unable to sleep, joyously anticipating that deeply desired gift from St. Nick. I promise you, that deeply desired gift has already arrived, with the greatest love imaginable, from our God.

AMEN.