

The Second Sunday of Advent  
Year C, 2021  
Amy Starr Redwine

Advent, this “getting ready” season, can so easily become a season that is all about *doing*. Mostly, we get ready by working really hard -- and this may be especially true this year as we anticipate holiday celebrations that look a bit more like what we used to do before the pandemic, when the time leading up to Christmas was a time to cook, clean, decorate, study, take finals, rehearse, attend concerts, write cards, mail cards, throw parties, go to parties, and shop for just the right gifts for family and friends. There is a common understanding among us that this is a *very busy* time.

So what a relief to come to worship on the second Sunday of Advent and hear the promise of PEACE, which is the theme for this day.

Yes, isn't that just what we need –

peace: some quiet time to put our feet up and rest

peace: an end to political bickering and partisan one-upmanship

peace: the absence of horrific conflict in places around the world.

What a relief to come here and discover that embedded in this season

is God's promise of PEACE.

Which begs the question: if the second Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of peace,

then why is it also the Sunday when we hear about John the Baptist –

that fiery preacher who referred to his congregants

by the river as a “brood of vipers”?

His words just don't sound very peaceful.

They sound more like John is picking a fight with God's people.

According to John, it's not their ancestry that matters to God –

that they are, as he puts it, “children of Abraham.”

What really matters is their ACTIONS.

The Quaker Civil Rights activist Howard Thurman lived from 1899 until 1991.

One of his best known works is a poem titled “The Work of Christmas.”

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and the princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.<sup>1</sup>

For us, the song of the angels hasn't yet rung out,  
the star has barely appeared in the sky,  
the kings and princes haven't left home,  
and the shepherds haven't received their invitation  
to the stable,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://putneyfriendsmeeting.org/2012/12/26/an-after-christmas-poem-by-howard-thurman/>

but today's text calls us to look ahead

to what Thurman calls the work of Christmas.

Apparently, getting ready for Christmas is NOT the most important work

because Christmas is not the goal;

it is merely the next stage in the ongoing transformation

God wants for the world, for all the ways God calls our lives

to more clearly reflect God's love and mercy.

So if we spend these weeks only doing and not heeding the words of

John the Baptist, not only will we not know peace,

we will never have the energy to attend to

the real work of Christmas.

Several years ago, Sheryl Stanberg's book *Lean In* became a bestseller.

In it, she encouraged women that,

contrary to what they may have been told or experienced,

they could have it all –

high-powered leadership positions

satisfying marriages

intimate and meaningful involvement

in their children's lives.

Many women took Stanberg's encouragement to heart

and worked really hard doing MORE,

furthering their careers while nurturing relationships

and staying involved with their children.

After Rosa Brooks read Sandberg's book, she decided the fact

that she had friends, family, children, and hobbies,

and that she took occasional vacations,

stopped working at a sensible hour

and got eight hours of sleep most nights did not mean she was a

well-balanced, boundaried person,

but that she was in fact a self-sabotaging slacker.

So she starting saying yes to every professional opportunity

and volunteering for every role at her children's school.

Her professional and social networks rapidly expanded.

She got promoted not just once, but twice,

and other parents began to look at her with admiration and approval.

But not too long after all this, she realized she was miserable.

She never saw her friends and the challenge of working so hard

was taking a toll on her work and her health.

Writing about this time, she reflected that we have tough legislation

mandating adequate rest periods for truck drivers and airline pilots –

not because they need their beauty sleep,

but because when overtired drivers and pilots

make mistakes, people can die.

While the stakes may not be quite as high in every line of work,

the reality is that, as Brooks writes,

“When a workplace is full of employees who always lean in  
and never lean back, it’s full of employees who are exhausted,  
brittle and incapable of showing much  
creativity or making good decisions.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, we have experienced this in a whole new way during the pandemic,

Which has led to what many are calling the Great Resignation,

As many workers are leaving jobs that they feel are incompatible

With a healthy lifestyle.

Sometimes, instead of constantly trying to do more, we need to say, “Enough!”

This is also true in the workplace that is the church.

For both love and work – including the real work of Christmas

finding the lost, healing the broken, feeding the hungry,

releasing the prisoners, rebuilding the nations, bringing peace

– this work requires a protected space

in which creativity can flourish,

for we need new solutions to these age-old problems.

John the Baptist was a preacher utterly unafraid to call out the need

for people to say “enough!”

He didn’t hesitate to tell people to stop consuming, stop acquiring,

stop accepting the status quo,

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<sup>2</sup> Rosa Brooks, “Recline, Don’t ‘Lean In’ (Why I Hate Sheryl Sandberg),” *Washington Post*, February 25, 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2014/02/25/recline-dont-lean-in-why-i-hate-sheryl-sandberg/>

He calls people to return to God

by getting rid of not only our stuff

but also by shedding some of our bad habits.

The people he is preaching to ask him to get more specific.

“What should we do?” they ask.

In response, he has different suggestions for different kinds of people –

those who have more than what they need should give some away

to those who don't have enough;

tax collectors should quit skimming off the top and collect

only what people owe;

soldiers should quit taking bribes.

All of these suggestions are similar in nature,

so we can pretty easily predict what advice John might have

for the rest of us:

quit holding on so tightly to our reputations and our stuff,

to the things we have been taught that

people like us should do.

Let it all go so that we can make room for God.

Because what's about to happen next – the start of Jesus's ministry –

is going to require some creativity and out of the box thinking.

So rest up!

God is about to do a new thing, John is saying,

and the old rules will no longer apply.

We need make room in our minds and hearts and souls  
to encounter God in a whole new way.

This making room may not be what we think of as peace,

but peace is what John the Baptist is preaching,

the peace that is described by the Hebrew word *shalom*.

*Shalom* doesn't just mean the absence of conflict.

It's Hebrew root literally means to make whole or complete,

and we can only make something whole or complete

when we first acknowledge how it is broken.

For God to make us whole, we must acknowledge our brokenness –

which includes all the ways we grasp and strive and cling –

especially during this season.

Acknowledging this brokenness, in ourselves, in each other, in our culture

and in our world, is the beginning of the hard work

that leads to deep peace, to *shalom*.

Maybe this is why on this Sunday of peace,

we hear John the Baptist reminding us

that we are broken and need to be restored.

When Barbara Brown Taylor was working on a book

about darkness, she met a Presbyterian minister who is also a serious caver,

and who loves to take people down into some of his favorite caves. He took

Taylor down so deep into a wild cave –

beyond the part of the cave with a few lights and handrails –  
so deep that when they turned off their headlamps  
she experienced the most palpable darkness she had ever known.

But, to her surprise, as tangible and complete as the darkness was,  
she didn't feel afraid or anxious.

Instead, she experienced the darkness as a loving mother  
wrapping her up in her arms.

And in letting go of her instinctive need for light and certainty,  
she discovered in that darkness a new kind of peace.<sup>3</sup>

What might happen if we gathered our courage and approached

Advent by keeping in mind the true work of Christmas,  
by giving up some of our DOING in order to discover  
what peace we might find when we spend less:

less time, less energy, less money, less expectation?

That might feel as foreign and frightening to us as venturing  
deep down into a wild cave and turning off our headlamps.

But only when we make room,

when we give up some of our assumptions and expectations, will we

discover something new about who we are and who God is,

and have the energy to participate in the world to which God calls us.

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor discusses this in an interview on the podcast “Everything Happens,” with Kate Bowler.  
<https://katebowler.com/barbara-brown-taylor-life-after-dark-s2e2/>

Today, both Isaiah and John the Baptist reminds us that preparing a way for God requires some rebalancing – as Isaiah puts it,

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.

John the Baptist says it a little differently, but he's telling us something similar,

to look at where our lives are out of balance, to make adjustments,  
to figure out where we have done too much or taken too much  
or acquired too much or said too much,  
and to know that we can stop doing, we can give away,  
we can make do with less, we can listen instead of speak,  
we can take small but meaningful actions that  
impact the challenges of our time.

We do all this by first making space, not just in our homes but in our hearts,  
space where Christ might come and dwell

and bring us the very **peace** for which desperately long,  
peace which names our brokenness

so that we can join in God's work of becoming whole again.

Steve Garnaas Holmes reflects on this in his poem, "Prepare the Way":

Enough of your junk drawer clutter  
bucket of old used punctuation  
heartthrob amusement ride of distraction.

Prayer is a **snow shovel**.

You plow it all aside. **All of it**.

Clear a space.

Admit it: your heart is a **hoarder**.

Clean out your piety's basement.

You don't build the way, don't accrue it.

You **empty** it.

Rough made smooth, crooked made straight,

busy made empty.

Empty it **all**.

Silence the noise, the chorus, the committee,

the crowd.

The empty place is not **long**, stretching away.

It's just right there, around you,

a circle of light,

empty air,

**silence**—not what you hear,

but how you **listen**,

what you **practice**.

Silence.

Now there's a way.

Wait.

For the Coming One,

who speaks silence,

who blesses the emptiness,

the Presence

who is the negative space itself...<sup>4</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Prepare the Way," Email Devotional, December 5, 2018.  
<https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections/79e323399tgc8a3r3bmezwtcsaz7t>