

Fred Craddock is a well known preacher who tells the following story about his Dad. Craddock says that when he was a boy, his mom would take him to church but that his Dad would never go with them. His Dad would complain about Sunday dinner being late because they were at church. Sometimes the minister would call and Craddock's father would say, "I know what he wants. The church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name. Another pledge. That's right. Another name. Another pledge. Isn't that the name of it?" Craddock says that is what his father always said.

Sometimes that church would have a revival and the pastor would always bring the evangelist by to visit with his Dad. The pastor would tell the evangelist to sic him. But Craddock's father always resisted. "The church only cares about another name and another pledge," he would always say.

When his father got older he eventually entered the VA Hospital. He got down to 73 pounds. The doctors took out his throat and the doctors said it was too late. They put in a metal tube and the radiation burned him to pieces. Craddock flew in to see his Dad. His Dad couldn't eat and he couldn't speak.

While in the room, Craddock says he looked around the room and saw all kinds of flowers. Cut flowers and potted flowers. A stack of cards twenty inches high sat next to his bed. And on the tray with his food was another flower. Craddock says that all of these flowers and potted plants and cards were from people in the church.

Craddock picked up a card and read it. His father saw him read it. And since he could not speak, his father picked up a Kleenex box and began to write on it. He wrote, "in this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story." Craddock then asked his father, "What is your story Daddy?" His father then wrote back, "I was wrong."

Today we have the read the story from Mark about John the Baptist. Note that the story of John the Baptist is the first story in the gospel of Mark. There is nothing in Mark about the birth of Jesus. Therefore, you will never hear anything from Mark read on Christmas Eve. Mark is the shortest of the 4 gospels and has led many to believe that Mark is the oldest of the four gospels. Many scholars assume that the writers Luke and Matthew had Mark in front of them and they added to it the stories that Mark did not know.

Mark begins by quoting the words which we read earlier from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Words about preparing a way for the Lord. Mark then introduces us to this strange character John the Baptist. John is described as being clothed in camels hair who ate locusts and wild honey. John the Baptist appears from out of the wilderness crying out that the people should repent and receive forgiveness.

Today marks the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is this season of preparation for the birth of the Christ child. And good preparation is so essential for the celebration of the birth to be meaningful.

Friday I was blessed to participate in a day of preparation. I spent Friday in Hopkins, SC at my parent's home helping to prepare for a yard sale. But this was not just any yard sale. This was the yard sale to dispense of whatever was left of the stuff that they had accumulated in their 60 years of living in that home and farm. Yesterday was the day when we sold off what was left of the place my family knows as Laurinton Dairy Farm, my home place.

So Friday was spent deciding between what someone might think was valuable and what someone would think was junk. My responsibility was to go into my Dad's man cave if you will. My Dad's man cave was the storage shed out back which contained the stuff that my Dad felt was important enough to keep from the farm. But now I was charged with deciding which of this stuff was worth putting a price tag on and which should be taken to the dump.

The old office chair with duck tape around it was considered worthy of pricing. Although it did not sell. The rusted metal instrument that you used to pull a calf from a birthing cow was determined to be a piece of junk. Although maybe some of you would love this piece of equipment. I don't know.

The containers of anti-freeze from unknown century was considered junk while the cans of assorted nails in the military carrying case was considered worthy of sale. And it did sell. The assorted aluminum ladders of varying size were considered worthy of sale while the unattached broom handles were considered junk.

We spent all day on Friday preparing for Saturday's sale. And then we returned to the home at 6 am on Saturday to do the final preparation. But all of this preparation was necessary for a successful Saturday sale. But let me tell you why Saturday's sale was important to me. It wasn't so that my parent's could make some money on the items that were sold.

Why all of that preparation was important to me was the fact that when Saturday came I had the opportunity to tell strangers that the box of cookware that they were buying were the pots that I purchased when I went off to college. The foot message machine they were purchasing for a couple of dollars was the machine that I purchased for my mom when I was about 10 or 11 years old because my mom complained about how tired her feet were and I wanted to do something nice for her.

You see, all of that preparation allowed me the chance to tell stories that were meaningful to me. I don't know if the person buying the toaster-r-oven really wanted to hear how I used it to warm up leftover friend chicken in it while I was a student in college. But in telling those stories and pulling out those items, I got to encounter those stories again for myself one more time. In telling those stories I got to feel like I was helping others to understand why these items were important and should be treated with care.

Advent is a time of preparation. Advent is time for us to prepare ourselves to tell the greatest story we can ever tell. The story about a birth of a child to a homeless family who could not find a place to stay. The story of a birth of a child born in a manger.

You see, that is what I think we should be preparing to do in the church. We should be preparing one another to share our story of what the birth of Jesus Christ means to us. For Fred Craddock's Dad, the birth of Christ meant coming to realize that being a part of church meant being part of a community that cared for one another when life became hard and unforgiving.

For me, the birth of Christ and following Jesus means having a sense of peace that no matter what I face in life I can trust that God loves me, cares for me, and has an overall plan and desire for me. Being a Christian for me means calm in the midst of whatever storm I face. But that is my story.

What is your story? What is the story that Christ's birth invites you to share? What is the story that God is yearning for you to reveal to the world.

Only you know what your story is that the world is crying out from the desert to hear. John the Baptist is the outsider who cries out for us Christians to share a story that means something to him and others.

Advent is an invitation for you to reflect on what this story means to you and to share that story. Sharing your story may make the birth of Christ real for someone else. AMEN.