

Our second reading is from the gospel according to Mark. There are a couple of observations which you will immediately notice about this gospel. Our reading this morning will be the first 8 verses of this gospel.

We would probably expect that Mark would begin his gospel with a story about the birth of Jesus. He does not do that. In fact, the gospel of Mark does not have anything about the birth of Jesus.

We have to turn to the gospels of Luke and Matthew if we want any information about the birth of Jesus. The gospel of John also does not include any information about the birth of Jesus.

The gospel of Mark begins with a proclamation from John the Baptist. In the gospel of Luke, we read the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy which results in the birth of John the Baptist.

But Mark doesn't tell us anything about John's birth. Instead, the gospel of Mark begins with an adult John the Baptist appearing on the scene from out of the wilderness and quoting the book of Isaiah.

And this leads us to the second point which you will notice in our gospel reading today. John quotes from the Isaiah passage that we also read from this morning. (Isaiah 40:1-5)

The Isaiah passage originates from the period about 530 years before the birth of Christ when Jerusalem was starting to rebuild after being conquered and its people sent off into exile. It is a passage of hope during very trying circumstances.

Knowing this information, we can see why John would turn to Isaiah to try to provide some historical background to who Jesus is and why he is coming into the world.

Read Mark 1:1-8

I will admit that I am not into zombies. I don't watch the Walking Dead although I know that some of you probably do. Zombies, as I understand them, are creatures that have returned to our world who have inhabited bodies, but they are not really human.

Zombies just kind of exist. And they apparently really scare people. I don't have a problem with people who are into zombies. It's just. I'm not into zombies.

But I wonder if some people during this season of Advent have become zombies without even knowing that this transformation has happened to their bodies and souls.

Father Jeffrey Kirby writes about this phenomenon. He says that "a zombie Christmas is worse than any attacks by Ebenezer Scrooge or the Grinch, who at least indirectly acknowledge the holiday even as they try to diminish it.

The victims of a zombie Christmas have become apathetic and detached to the reality of Christmas. They've been beaten up and are the living dead among the elves, mistletoe, and tinsel. They refuse to sing the carols, are anesthetized to the jingle bells, indifferent to the excitement of gifts, and callous to the cheerful greetings, "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays."

Father Kirby then asks how this zombie Christmas happens. He says it happens "easily enough. It starts when the Nativity of Jesus Christ and the peace, hope, and joy of that event are neglected or lost in the human soul. Without that focus, everything else can become a burden. The mind wonders: Why all this work? What's the point?

After some time, such a burden breaks down the soul. It becomes comatose to the external things that have become painfully required of it and are presumed to cost too much in terms of emotional energy or of financial expense. And so, the soul sleeps but the body goes through the motions. The person exists as if she's dead. The zombie Christmas begins."

How many of us are going through a zombie Christmas this year? How many of us are simply going through the motions? How many of us have become so discouraged that the meaning of Christmas is lacking in true meaning?

And I will admit that part of me has started Advent this way. Part of me feels like a zombie at times. It's not hard to do. Many of us hear about events around the world and in our own country and we get discouraged.

We see the violence in our community, nation, and world and this leads us toward becoming zombies at Christmas. I find myself angry at hearing how many of our male political and business leaders are admitting to or not owning up to sexual misconduct. I am particularly angry when I hear the story of Mary and Joseph being used by a politician who is a Christian to justify pedophilia.

I find myself discouraged when I see the story that we Christians claim as our own being manipulated to justify commercialism or nationalism. Some of us may be facing personal and family crises that are leaving us numb. A close friend or family member is suffering physically or emotionally, and you feel frustrated and helpless. All of this can lead us into becoming zombie Christians.

But that is why it is important to gather in a sanctuary like this and to hear the story once again. To remind ourselves of what this story is really all about.

We are so blessed to be able to gather in a simple place of worship and to worship together and to participate in the story together. I feel so blessed to be able to gather in this building with its rich history and sense of rootedness.

For we gather today and realize that since the 1850s people have gathered in this place and read the same scriptures that we are reading today. Many generations have cut a local tree and placed in up here and decorated it.

Many different children and youth have worn the robes that were used today in the portion of the pageant that was presented. Many generations have sat in the pews here and shared stories of the faith.

John the Baptist reminds us that we are called to prepare the way of the Lord. How are we invited to do that today?

I am going to invite us to prepare the way of the Lord by turning to our vision statement on the front of our bulletin. We prepare the way of the Lord by making connections personally, locally, and globally.

We prepare the way of the Lord personally by getting ourselves focused on our personal relationship with the Jesus that we prepare to welcome into our lives and into our hearts. We can become so focused on the things outside of ourselves that we forget the part that is within us.

If we are so focused on doing stuff or acquiring stuff, then we forget to nurture our own spiritual selves. So, we prepare the way of the Lord by nurturing our relationship with the Lord.

You will also read that we are invited to make connections locally. Therefore, we prepare the way of the Lord by being connected and responding to the needs of our community.

I was blessed to see my son James perform the character of the young Ebenezer Scrooge in the Rock Hill Community Theatre this weekend. Through the visit of a ghost during a dream Scrooge learns of the needs of the people that are closest to him. Scrooge learns about the importance to giving to others in his community.

And the third way we prepare the way of the Lord by using our vision statement is to make connections globally. God is not just the God of people who are born in this country.

God is the God is all people so therefore we prepare the way of the Lord by serving all of God's people across the world and those that come here from across the world.

During this season of Advent, we are reminded that we have a job to do. We are called by God to prepare the way of the Lord. Personally, locally, and globally. We prepare the way of the Lord.

This Christmas we do not want to be zombies. No one likes zombies!!
AMEN.

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-Kirby, Jeffrey, <https://cruxnow.com/commentary/2017/12/03/beware-zombie-christmas/>

-Given: December 10, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)