

Sermon December 6, 2020
Advent 2 Grace Cathedral San Francisco
The Very Reverend Dr. Peggy Patterson

Year B Advent 2 Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15, Mark 1:1-8

The Friday morning after Thanksgiving, as my eyes scanned across the New York Times at my door, I saw a color picture of a little boy...walking along the highway, pulling an unwieldy suitcase behind his slender, masked body.

His red plastic shoes were glowing in the twilight as he pulled the suitcase which weighed almost as much as he did.

The next photo captured Sebastian almost blown off his feet as a truck whizzed by on the highway.

“Where are you going?” someone asked Sebastian. “To Venezuela,” he shouted,

Six year old Sebastian and his 4 months pregnant mother, were among hundreds of MIGRANTS on the road that morning, attempting to walk back home to Venezuela after spending some month in refuge in Colombia.

Jessika and Sebastian had originally fled Venezuela to escape the oppressive conditions and the raging virus there. Now the virus had caught up with them in Colombia, and Jessika had lost her job as a florist’s assistant, and lost their apartment, and Sebastian had lost his first schooling and his new love of reading.

There was ,of course, no guarantee of safety back home in Venezuela, but there was HOPE, and family, even though Jessika had learned that the little house she left in her village when she fled to Colombia had been taken over by the same Criminals who had killed her husband and left her a pregnant widow at 22.

So Mother and Son kept walking...day after day, every night hoping to find a thicket or hidden place behind a sign to sleep.

Nights were the worst times on the road...Jessika began worrying about where they would sleep as soon as she waked up...and always, always, what they would eat.

The miles turned into hundreds over the next months...and Jessika's belly grew round and heavy with child.

Even though Jessika kept hearing dangerous stories about conditions in Venezuela, she was still HOPEFUL, and she did not give up.

They even decided to give their last \$30 to some smugglers who promised to take them to the Venezuelan border. The next night, pregnant Jessica and Sebastian piled into the truck with other travelers, and it began to climb over the mountains,

In the middle of the night, the truck stopped abruptly...right at the edge of a river.

Jessika knew it was still a six hour walk to the border of Venezuela, but the smugglers insisted:

"Get out! Get out! This is as far as we go!"

"Get out and walk."

Eventually, after many disappointments, the worsening circumstances in Venezuela persuaded Jessika to turn around and return to Colombia... So...the young family was on the road again.

Finally, her nine months had passed, and Jessika knew her time had come to have the baby..

She gave birth back in Colombia, still homeless and poor and hungry, in her crowded detention shelter with 600 other people.

Her water broke as she slept in a tiny twin bed she shared with her son.

**When I read Jessika's story, and saw the pictures of this young mother and her son, I could not help thinking of Mary...
...and how she must have dreaded her own journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem,**

Even with a donkey, or maybe especially with a DONKEY!, the journey must have been unbearable.... For one "so GREAT WITH CHILD"(as we used to say).

Like Jessika, Mary and Joseph were on their own journey...

They also were making their journey because of circumstances beyond their control. The CENSUS, of all things.

**They, too, were facing childbirth alone in a makeshift bedroom,
-- an animal stall with a manger as a bed**

**In a certain sense we, TOO, are on a Journey, ALL OF US, an Advent Journey.
Our journey is not as hazardous as theirs for most of us,
but a journey just the same.**

**On our ADVENT JOURNEY this morning,
We HEAR the ADVENT Prophets :
Second Isaiah and John the Baptist**

Someone wrote this week that these two prophets are
"Splashing COLD WATER on our faces" to get us ready!

It IS ADVENT!! They seem to say!

" WAKE UP,"

"PREPARE the way for the King,"

"REPENT "

"RECEIVE FORGIVENESS"

Stay ALERT"

BE READY WHEN HE COMES!

**Are you ready? ...How is your ADVENT preparation going?
Haven't started?**

Not to worry, there are still three weeks left to prepare!

**What do you want to change in your life to make the way
smooth for the birth of Jesus, the Christ Child, in your life?**

**Have you been looking around you for the signs of God's actions in your world
and for God's people?**

**GOD's PEOPLE like Jessika,
who are**

...longing for HOPE,

...longing for HOME,

...Longing for SAFETY and FOOD for their children.

The first Prophet we hear this morning is the voice of Isaiah.

Most scholars agree that this Isaiah lived with the people in Exile during their years in Babylon, and is now preparing them for a new day of freedom and return To Jerusalem.

Isaiah, is preaching to a people...

who have known suffering

WHO have felt the deep loss of their homeland.

WHO have been in Babylon, in EXILE, for almost fifty years.

WHO have seen their homes and their BELOVED TEMPLE DESTROYED.

AND WHO have even felt so **despondent that they felt deserted by GOD.**

Isaiah speaks God's WORDS to them:

Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

And cry to her that her warfare is ended,

**That her iniquity is pardoned,
That she has received from the Lord's Hand double for all her sins.**

Don't we long to hear these words spoken to us, especially after nine months of Covid uncertainty and suffering and death and loss.

I was surprised to realize as I pondered these prophecies for the second Sunday of Advent, and told the stories of two young mothers, that *it had actually been EXACTLY NINE MONTHS Since the PANDEMIC started taking over our lives (much as a first pregnancy takes over our bodies).*

I counted on my fingers NINE MONTHS since that auspicious night of March 4 when my own daughter called to say that we would have to begin immediately to shelter and isolate because her own high risk pregnancy and birth were threatened by the Pandemic.

Nine months had signaled to Jessika ...walking the highway between Venezuela and Colombia, that her time for birth was near.

Nine months had signaled to Mary on the Road to Bethlehem that she must be prepared to give birth on the journey, maybe even alone.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, nine months after we were shocked by the first "STAY in PLACE ORDER", we hear to words of John the Baptist, coming out of the Wilderness, (Camel's hair and locusts and all!) inviting the people of Judea and Jerusalem...**AND all of US...To Prepare the WAY of the Lord.**

**What exactly did John the Baptist mean when he said to them,
"To Prepare the Way of the Lord" ...?**

He said,

--REPENT and receive forgiveness of your sins,

--TURN AROUND

--GO IN ANOTHER DIRECTION on your LIFE JOURNEY!

REPENT? What does that mean?

...the WORD really just means," CHANGE YOUR MIND",

Rethink your priorities,

Receive the forgiveness that comes with repentance,

Renew your commitment to God's Covenant with you.

John the Baptist says:

Be PREPARED for the NEW BIRTH that is coming to YOU this

CHRISTMAS...It has been nine months after all:

Your body, your LIFE has been turned upside down these last nine months, ...

Your body is longing for change this Advent.

YOUR BODY is Ready for a new life,

And for new air, God's breath,

to fill your lungs as you are REBORN.

Hear Isaiah's Words for YOU this morning:

'COMFORT, O COMFORT my People,

Says our God.

SPEAK Tenderly to Jerusalem

And CRY to her that her warfare is accomplished,

A BABY is waiting to be born in your life this Advent. The Christ Child.

Prepare the way,

Stay ALERT,

SPLASH YOUR FACE WITH WATER

AND WAKE UP,

Because...God is here this morning, speaking TENDERLY to YOU. AMEN

