



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea** THE THIRD SUNDAY  
*The Episcopal Church* OF ADVENT  
*in Destin, Florida* DECEMBER 17, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

The Scout motto is...“Be Prepared.” And all good lawyers know that to effectively represent their clients in court, they must” be prepared.” Good drivers know to visualize and plan their responses to various traffic emergencies so that they may respond quickly without losing even the few nanoseconds thinking about how to respond, nanoseconds that may be the difference between life and death. And Sully Sullenburger and his co-pilot Jeffrey Skiles knew the first thing to do in the event of dual engine failure was turn on the auxiliary power unit to maintain the electrical power that enabled them to maintain communications and control of their Airbus 320 as it descended onto the Hudson River. Why? Because they could consult a checklist prepared in advance for just that situation and no doubt had dealt with engine failures in simulators during their training. In short, when confronted with a nearly catastrophic emergency, they were prepared. And 155 people skirted a tragic death.

In Advent we are called to anticipate and prepare for our celebration of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. No need to elaborate on the significance of that event. (I hope! Anyone who is wondering might pay particular attention to the Nicene Creed in a few minutes.)

So after service today we will prepare our sanctuary for our celebration of Christmas with greens and lights and a creche and good cheer. But our decorations are only the outward signs of our joy.

And this morning’s reading from the Gospel according to John reminds us that what is inward and spiritual is the true locus of our joy and that as we prepare for Christmas, the attitude and orientation of our hearts is foremost.

Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist, as he is popularly known, was in today’s parlance Jesus’ advance team. He prepared the populace not only by announcing Jesus’ presence, but also by baptizing them with water.

Now John’s baptism with water was unique. John was preaching a need to repent and a baptism of repentance. And repent means to turn around. Turn our lives around. Reorient them from sin and worldly distraction to righteousness and God’s presence in our lives.

And dear Paul in his letter to this morning makes an obvious and powerful suggestion about how we might do that:

...[P]ray without ceasing...<sup>1</sup>

Sounds daunting. Do we envision ourselves on our knees in church 24 hours a day, clutching our prayerbook. So maybe we should look harder at our definition of prayer. Because as essential as our prayer book is to us, prayer can be much more than words that we recite from a prepared text.

Prayer is simply and broadly our communication with God. And that is a two-way channel. And it is a channel that is always active. Maybe we just need to stay tuned in. Do we see God in the beauty of a sunset? Do we hear God in the pounding of the surf at the beach? In the moments of beauty or insight when we go “ahhh?” In the moments of revelation or realization when we go “aha?”

When we cry with a grieving neighbor or laugh with a joyous child? When we lament the horrors of man’s inhumanity to man or rejoice in the compassion and heroism of strangers in far way lands? In all the moments that take our breath away in the face of great evil or unconceivable good. When we say “aha” because we realize that we never are disconnected from God? When we sigh in a newfound peace because we know we may never be out-of-touch with God. God hears. God knows. God appreciates.

We have a dear friend, not terribly religious, whose concept of prayer is contemplating the good things she would like to see in her life and in the world. How different might all our lives be if we “prayed” that way, focusing on what is good and right.

After all, as our oft-quoted sage Fred Buechner reminds us:

Whatever else it may or may not be, prayer is at least talking to yourself, and that's in itself not always a bad idea. Talk to yourself about your own life, about what you've done and what you've failed to do, and about who you are and who you wish you were and who the people you love are and the people you don't love too. Talk to yourself about what matters most to you, because if you don't, you may forget what matters most to you.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A seekers ABC's*, HarperOne; Expanded edition (September 24, 1993).

Is that the repentance, the re-orientation of our lives that John the Baptist beckons us? Is that how we might best prepare for Christmas in our hearts and minds and bodies and souls? To remember what matters most?