

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Mark bypasses the Christmas narratives, we find in Matthew and Luke, in favor of beginning his Gospel, presenting John the Baptist announcing the coming of the One promised by the Prophet Isaiah. Commentators surmise that he wrote this first of the Gospel accounts in a bit of a hurry, fearful that those who were witnesses to the coming of Christ would die before anyone prepared a written testimony of Christ's life.

In any event, we might dare to see all of our Christmas preparations as doing the work of John the Baptist, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." The gifts we buy and wrap and give, we might see as representing the gift of Himself that God gave us in the person of Jesus. The cards we write and send to loved ones and long-distant friends connect us, unify us to others much as Christ's coming united us to God Himself. Even when we string lights on our houses and trees, we are announcing that Christ, the Light of the World, has come.

Let's take a look at this lighting thing. That was a big deal in our house. Only my Dad could string the lights and take them down. However, it was left to me, as his gofer, to untangle the knots of cords of which there seemed to be hundreds. I was to present them to him cord by cord. He would then test them before he put them up. Sometimes there was a bulb or two that had blown out that could be easily replaced. Other times, since the lights were run in a series, you had to test each bulb until you found the one that was blown. When that was replaced the whole string of lights lit up. It really was a tedious job, but I loved doing it because it meant I could spend a lot of time with my Dad.

As I reflected on that, it occurred to me that untangling the knots of those cords and trying to get all the bulbs lit was not unlike what we do

here in the Church. A lot of people come to Church tangled in knots of worry or sadness or weariness or loneliness. It is our job in preparing the way of the Lord and making straight his path to them by welcoming them with warm hospitality and comfort and friendship.

Like burned out light bulbs, some of us don't seem to have the light of God shining in our lives. We refuse to even acknowledge the people sitting with us. We don't even try to sing the praises of God. We're in a hurry to get in and a hurry to get out. And then we leave Church saying we didn't get anything out of it. The problem with such folks is they never got plugged in or they need to examine themselves and test which bulb isn't working and replace it perhaps with a good confession.

Sometimes the work of being Church, not just to each other, but to the larger community of which we are a part, can be really tedious. You're untangling your own knots and have to help others untangle theirs. Every now and then, you find yourself working at keeping all the bulbs of God's grace shining in your own life. Then you have to help others get plugged in or help them to replace a bulb that will allow the light of Christ to shine in their lives too. But, tedious though it may be, you've got to love doing it, because it means we get to spend a lot of time with our Dad.

Church, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His path!