

**The Rev. Kathy Crary
December 14, 2008
St James Episcopal Church
Advent III**

What happens to nice guys? And what is the fate of all those marvelous and talented swimmers who ended up second place in the Olympics when they were challenging Michael Phelps. We don't remember their names much. If you are interviewing for a job and the boss calls you and said you were number two, there is absolutely nothing about that telephone call that gives you cause for rejoicing. If you were beat out by your little brother or your younger cousin, well, it takes a pretty big person to be congratulatory.

John is the ultimate interim priest. He is not the one and he knows it. His work is to prepare the people of God for the one who is to come. Now, this is interim work with a community that has a whole lot of history to consider. John is the interim for all those people who needed voice and joy and hope and freedom. He is the interim for Romans who were used to taking everything by force. He is the interim for the Jews who were sure they were the chosen ones, with a special covenant with the Almighty. But they were living out lives filled with shoulds and have tos. The interim job of John was to bring the people to repentance and to make them ready. It was a house cleaning operation before company comes over.

But I get John's voice. He is the one who gets to point out what work needs to be done and then get out of the way. He knows his role; he goes all out and ends up paying the highest and ultimate price for his convictions. Tradition says John's head is served up on a platter in the midst of the political and theocratic turmoil of the world in which he lived.

He knows his job description and he is doing his darnedest to do it well. He points to Jesus as the Messiah, the one who really can do something. Here is the voice crying out the in wilderness, "Change is coming, prepare for it."

Both of this men brought so many people together who believed in God and were faithful in all the ways they knew how to be faithful. Standing at the crossroads of trade routes, conquering armies and a mix of religious and ethnic cultures, they spoke to the hearts of so many and continue to speak to our hearts, too.

Our work and labor in the church and our witness to the power of God in our lives is not to point to ourselves but to God. Our own needs for power, control, replacement for family and community, our own egos and needs and wants can really get wrapped up and mixed up in our motives and our efforts. When this happens, John's voice travels over the surface of the waters, crying out for our repentance and for newness of life. We are being prepared for the way of the Lord.

Our own rough places need smoothing out. We need the wrong turns of our roads re-engineered and the dramatic elevation changes need leveling. There is a lot of roadwork and construction zones ahead. We have a lot to sort through as the people of God in Fremont and the community of St. James.

We need John before Jesus comes among us. We need to heed the call, pay proper homage to our past, name the prophets, priests and leaders who have brought us this far, dip ourselves in a pool for cleansing and healing and finally, robed and ready, the one John has been waiting for, the blessed One is coming.

I don't mean the new rector.

Interim time is a good time to renew the relationship we have with God. That is the first spiritual step that goes with all the other things we've talked about in the last eight weeks or so. Rectors and clergy come and go, parishioners and churches come and go. Our relationship with God is the constant.

This year, in what remains of Advent, I hope you will take the time to heed interim priest John as he asks you to prepare the way for the Lord.