As a general rule we don’t spend a lot of time thinking about John the Baptist and his role as one who prepares the way for Christ. The scriptures tell us that John, a much desired, child, was born about the time that Jesus was born and that they were related. Jesus’ mother Mary and John’s mother Elizabeth were cousins which means that John and Jesus were cousins, too. The scriptures tell us that Mary visited Elizabeth while they were both pregnant and that John leapt within his mother’s womb when they met. We don’t know if John and Jesus ever visited or played together as children. We do know that John understood his role to be that of one who prepared the way for Jesus.

John began his ministry before Jesus began his. It seems that John left home and joined a dessert community of people who believed that people were not living as God wanted them to live and that change was needed. The people of John’s community practiced a ritual washing that involved being completely immersed in water as a sign that they were ready for this change. Somewhere along the way John left his community and began to proclaim his message that people needed to change, to turn away from the way they were living and to turn toward God and God’s ways. While many people thought John was strange and ignored him there were others who listened. Take a moment to listen to this prose offered by the” Spill the Beans” resource titled “Wild Swimming.”

Wild Swimming

Why? Because he made God sound wild again. Because nobody talks that way anymore. Because we get embarrassed if anyone does.

You really want me to tell you? How I know he’s right, a true prophet? It’s so easy to write him off, isn’t it – crazy man, wilderness crackpot, fanatic; weirdo. He doesn’t dress normally, He doesn’t eat normally. He’s untamed, that’s what he is – who’d want to be seen with him?

But look at us all. Laughing at ourselves, jubilant, because it isn’t just me. I’m not the only one. I’m not alone this time. This wild man makes the most sense we’ve ever heard. Something is coming and he knows it.

He’s not looking for glory. He is I mean, he is looking for glory, but not for himself. He’s seeing a glory beyond him, and he’s asking if we see it too, and if we do, then how about a wild swim to get ready!

It was freezing! A total shock to the system. I could hardly breathe. Some people shrieked. Some laughed. Some burst into tears. Some were silent.

None of us really knows how to describe it. We stood around afterwards, hugging and shivering and glowing. Because God became wild again; God who has never been tamed.

And what ever John’s seen coming, we’re in for a wild ride.

And so, while the prose ends, the story does not. Jesus hears about John and goes to see him asking John to baptize him. John knows it is Jesus and at first refuses saying that he, John, is not fit. But Jesus insists and as Jesus is being brought up from under the water the Spirit descends and a voice from heaven speaks saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And Jesus ministry begins.

I am not a particularly musical person. I don’t play a musical instrument. I don’t read music. When I sing, I struggle to carry a tune but have a good enough ear to know when I am off. And still music has a profound influence on me. As I’ve been pondering today’s message and this Advent season there have been two pieces of music running through my brain, my thoughts. The first is from Hadel’s Messiah, it starts Every valley, every valley and speaks of exaltation. The second is from the musical Godspell and starts with the words, “Prepare ye, prepare ye, the way of the Lord …” The Advent season is meant to be a time of preparation.

As I was preparing this message there was another verse from another song that was running through my mind, the words were, “ – A change is gonna come.” I couldn’t connect these words to anything. So, I did what I increasingly do. I turned to the internet and googled it. Turns out it is a line from a song by a man named Sam Cooke. Sam Cooke was born in 1931 the fifth child of a black, Baptist preacher in Mississippi who moved to Chicago shortly after Sam was born. In 1957 Sam added an e to his last name Cooke as a symbol of a change in his life. He sings of being born in a tent by a river and that like the river he has been running ever since. It is a song of protest about racism and its negative consequences and of his hope, his vision that a change is going to come. Sam Cooke was becoming quite popular and developing quite a following when he was shot and killed in 1964 by a motel owner in Los Angels, a white woman. Considered one of the most influential soul artists of all time I can help but wonder if the world might be a different and much better place if Sam’s life and career and message had not been cut short.

The focus for this second Sunday of Advent is Peace. The Hebrew concept of “Shalom”, which is translated peace is about much more than the absence of conflict. It is about wholeness, wellbeing, belonging and inclusion. It is about everyone having access to the resources they need to realize their full potential. It is about everyone having enough, enough food, enough safe water, enough shelter, enough clothing, enough companionship, enough education, enough knowledge, to have life full and abundant. It is about those who have more than they need sharing to see that everyone, everywhere, has enough.

Today’s reading speaks of studying war no more. Perhaps rather than simply studying war no more we need to intentionally and deliberately study peace and how to go about making and building peace. May this Advent season be for each of us and all of us about preparing and getting ready. Preparing to celebrate the birth, the coming to our world of Emmanual, God with us. May this Advent season be about preparing and equipping ourselves to be the makers and bringers of Shalom; the makers and bringers of Peace. May we continue to believe that, “a change is gonna come”, and be those who work for that change.