

**PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD**

**LUKE 3:1-6 DECEMBER 8, 2024**

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In the early 1970's a Broadway show entitled Godspell was introduced to audiences with mixed reviews. While pastoring the Irvington/Richview congregations I took the youth group of those churches to St. Louis to see the production. I say it was greeted with mixed reviews but it had a biblical message presented in a way that spoke to people like those in my youth group. The various songs became topics for discussion in youth meeting for some time after that.

The musical was based on the Gospel of Matthew. It began with various individuals sharing with us the words of many of the classic philosophers and later "wise men" of the day. But, then the individual voices all spoke at one time in a noisy babble that was meant to illustrate the tower of Babel where everyone spoke but few understood each other.

Then another song began and the babble faded away. This song was John the Baptist *singing*:  
*Prepare ye, the way of the Lord*  
*Prepare ye, the way of the Lord*

That phrase was to be repeated ten times when an invitation to all is given,  
Everybody now(and everyone sang)  
*Prepare ye, the way of the Lord*  
*Prepare ye, the way of the Lord*

This is the word of John the Baptist as he shares with us the words of Isaiah in our text for this morning in Luke 3:1-6:

*3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
5 Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'* "

The Word of God comes to John the Baptist in the wilderness. The word that John preaches is good news. God is regathering scattered Israel. And yet, this good news is also demanding, because we cannot receive this news and remain as we are. Repentance, change, and transformation are demanded. Thus, John calls upon the multitudes to "repent," he calls upon all of us to prepare for the advent of the Messiah by submitting to God's transformation of our lives. Christians are those who are prepared to be met by the God who has turned toward us in Jesus Christ. And when Christ comes to us, he takes us places we would have never ventured if he had not taken us there.

All the Gospels agree that you can't get to Jesus without first hearing John the Baptist preach on the Second Sunday of Advent. John is a bridge from the Old Testament to the New. While John preaches about what's happening now and in the future, you can't make sense of him except by knowing what God has done before.

Please note that the word John preaches is not his own. His sermons are not self-derived or original. If God had not come to John out in the wilderness, there would be nothing for John to say. Luke is clear, *“the word of God came to John.”* John the Baptist did not come to God; God came to John. I think this distinction is important. John is in the wilderness. He is out beyond the established, governmentally approved media outlets. It is there, in the wilderness, in a world full of political oppression and unjust suffering, where the powerful swagger about stepping on the powerless, that the word of God comes to John the Baptist.

John gives people the good word: get ready, people of God, God’s coming to you, God’s reaching out to you. (The typical way to get from exile in Babylonia back home to Israel is to go all the way around the desert, over the mountains, through the wilderness valleys. The prophet Isaiah foretold a time when God Almighty was going to perform a mighty highway construction program, straight through the desert down a level highway straight home.)

One of the most demanding aspects of travel is preparation involved. What should you take on the trip? What should you leave behind? Above all, how should you be prepared for unexpected eventualities?

Back in the day when the evangelist Billy Graham was preaching at crusades in different cities it was amazing to behold the amount of preparation. They would select a site for the area wide meeting and then all sort of things started happening long before the nights of the meetings. I don’t remember much about the services themselves—except of course the wonderful voice of George Beverly Shah. But what I remember most is the two years of preparation for the event. The area congregations breathlessly prepared as if Billy were going to drop in tomorrow. Churches were required to vote on whether or not to participate, pony up funds to support the costs, and hold hundreds of weekly prayer meetings all over town. By the time Billy finally arrived to save our people, he couldn’t fail. We were already so worked up—prepared to direct traffic, usher, collect funds, hand out leaflets, lead others down to the front upon hearing the first notes of *“Just As I Am,”* take down names of converts, set up post crusade gatherings—that all Billy needed to say to have a successful sermon was, *“Hello. I’m Billy Graham.”*

So, when someone responds to the church’s Advent announcement with, *“God has never shown up to me,”* it’s not unreasonable to say, *“Maybe God has, but you weren’t PREPARED to be surprised. Because you thought you’d seen everything of God, you missed Advent.”*

John’s sermon to the multitudes comprises just a few words:

*“Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”*

*Prepare! Get ready!*

*How? Wash up!”*

I might wonder if “Prepare!” is enough material for an entire Advent sermon? But I guess much depends on what you’re preparing for. Nobody needs to be told, *“Prepare to be bored to death by another dull sermon,”* or *“Get ready to be confirmed in what you’ve always thought.”* No preparation is needed, and no straight path is required if you intend to walk in the direction you’ve always walked.

How different is the sermon of John from many? Who needs to prepare to hear a preacher say, in effect, *“Let me introduce you to Jesus whom you already think you know. As you know, he’s a very nice, moderate person who is a lot like you. He will tell you what you have always wanted to hear, confirm what you have always believed, and walk alongside you in whatever direction you are most comfortable walking.”*

The best Christmas sermon I ever heard was from the pastor who stood up on Christmas Eve and simply said to his congregation. *“Tonight, I have some breaking news.”* Then he leaned into the microphone for good effect and said, *“Good news. Tonight, the invasion has begun. We’re about to be liberated.”* He sat down, and we sang Christmas carols like our lives depended upon it, which, of course, they do.

Gradual human improvement, steady forward movement, and taking one cautious step at a time will not get us where we need to be. Our salvation requires some fresh intervention from the outside—a shake-up. We need a God who doesn’t mind showing up, stepping in, and doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

New birth. Day one. Genesis 1 redone.

And yet, the God who makes a fresh beginning in the advent of Christ is the same God who was God all along. The Incarnation (God in human flesh) was not God's novel act of desperation when everything else God tried before didn't work. Stumped by our terrible sin, God said, *"I've got an idea! I'll take on human flesh and be born of a virgin! Maybe that will finally grab their attention!"*

No. Christ wasn't a new and improved God who came to us after the former God didn't live up to our expectations. Jesus's advent is not God's Plan B after God's Plan A failed. Christ was God all along, what God was up to from the very first. In the Old Testament, all the way back to the prophet Jeremiah, God had said, *"I will be your God, and you will be my people"* (Jeremiah 30:22). Some of the prophets had insisted that there would be a day when God, who had from the first wanted us to turn, return to God, would decisively step in, stunningly self-reveal, and turn to us.

In Mary's baby named Jesus, God is doing what God had always done for Israel—saving God's people. God did not become something in Jesus that God was not. From the first days of human history God loves to take the bad news about us and make it into God's good news. Jesus comes to us, not because our sin is so bad that God finally has to do something dramatic.

Jesus comes to us because that's what the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have always done—reaching out to us, lifting up the lowly, and casting down the proud and mighty. God takes on flesh, our flesh because God has always been God with us, for us.

There's never been a better Psalm to describe what God's up to than Psalm 139. I'm sure that John the Baptist and most of those to whom John preached knew this Psalm by heart. From the cradle to the grave, we cannot be rid of God's seeking, *searching love*:

*LORD,...*

*You know, when I sit down and when I stand up.*

*Even from far away, you comprehend my plans....*

*You surround me—front and back....*

*Where could I go to get away from your spirit?*

*Where could I go to escape your presence?*

*If I went up to heaven, you would be there.*

*If I went down to the grave, you would be there too!*

*If I could fly on the wings of dawn,*

*stopping to rest only on the far side of  
the ocean—*

*even there your hand would guide me;*

*even there your strong hand would hold me tight!*

*If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me;*

*the light will become night around me,"*

*even then the darkness isn't too dark for you!...*

*you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb....*

*"I will be your God and you will be mine"* from the cradle to the grave, earthly beginning to eternal end, is the same God to whom John points. Every advent of God, between the First Advent and the next, is a reiteration of the Psalmist's, *"Where could I go to get away from your spirit? Where could I go to escape your presence?"*

Here is the beginning, the birth of a way of God being God with us, something so fresh and new that we must prepare for the jolt. God is making good on God's ancient promises to Israel, but this time is showing up in a way we didn't expect. Hold on to your hats; the Lord is coming, ready or not, in places unimaginable, accomplishing the inconceivable.

It's Advent. We need to prepare to be surprised by God. And what did John the Baptist say we needed

to do to prepare? REPENT!

When I took the youth group to see Godspell, toward the end of the play this is the prayer we heard in the song, We Beseech Thee.

*Father, hear thy children's call  
Humbly at thy feet we fall  
Prodigals confessing all  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

*We thy call have disobeyed  
Into paths of sin have strayed  
And repentance have delayed  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

*Sick! We come to thee for cure  
Guilty! We seek thy mercy sure  
Evil! We long to be made pure  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

*Blind! We pray that we may see  
Bound! We pray to be made free  
Stained! We pray for sanctity  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

*Come sing about Love!  
That made us first to be  
Come sing about Love!  
That made the stone and tree  
Come sing about Love!  
That draws us lovingly  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

*By the gracious saving call  
Spoken tenderly to all  
Who have shared man's guilt and fall  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

*By the love that longs to bless  
Pitying our sore distress  
Leading us to holiness  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

*Grant us all from earth to rise  
And to strain with eager eyes  
Towards the promised Heavenly prize  
We beseech thee, hear us!*

My friends, this is Advent, I invite us to PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD.LET US REPENT AND WALK NEW PATHS TOWARD GOD!