Isaiah 40:1-11 Schwartzwald and St. Paul United Church of Christ

Luke 3:1-6 December 8, 2024 Kim M. Henning

“Prepare the Way of the Lord”

Grace to you and peace from God who comes to us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

Once a year, at least…….I have a dream at night that makes me feel very uncomfortable.

In this dream, I am a college student. I am registered to take a science class in college. At the beginning of the fall semester, I go to the first class. We’re given a syllabus. I purchase books. I’m ready to go.

But soon things start falling apart. My class attendance was irregular. I seem to miss more classes than I attend. Class attendance was not my only problem. I have books but I don’t read them. I am given assignments, but I don’t complete them because I’m too busy.

In this dream I attended the last day of class. And wouldn’t you know it, a final exam is passed out. I look at the test. I feel confused. I am disoriented. I’m scared. I have a test before me, but no answers in my head. I panic. It is just then, that I am jolted awake from my sleep, and I stare into the darkness of the night.

The feeling of being unprepared was awful. The feeling of being unprepared wakes me from my sleep. It was just a dream. It was more than a dream.

If you’re keeping track, today is the second Sunday of Advent. The second and the third Sundays of Advent are always focused on John the Baptist. In the life of the church, a person is unable to get to Jesus’ birth without first spending some time with John.

John is one of those persons you’ll never forget once you see him. He was dressed in camel’s hair. He wore a leather girdle. He ate locusts and wild honey.

If John walked into this worship service, you’d instantly recognize him appearance immediately. But John was more than his appearance. The text we read earlier said, (he was) “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

John was a late-in-life child born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. When John was born, Zechariah offered a prayer of praise to God. In that prayer, Zechariah said of John, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.”

In the musical Godspell, it is John who sings, “prepare ye the way of the Lord.” What is powerful about that song is that those seven words are repeated 12 times, and……. those are the only words in the entire song. What is John’s song? “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” Or to say that in another way, “when the Lord comes, you don’t want to be unprepared.”

John the Baptist never meant to be a star attraction. He is never about himself. John’s purpose was/is to prepare people for Jesus. It is one thing to answer the question, “Are you prepared for Christmas?” It is a much deeper thing to answer the question, “Are you prepared for Jesus?’

Let’s take a step back. Our biblical text opened with a description of the political and religious world at that time in history. What did the political world look like? “In the fifteenth years of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler of Abilene.”

Isarel was solidly governed. Tiberius was the Roman Emperor. We know the exact dates of his birth and death. Tiberius was born on November 16, 42 B.C. He died March 16, 37 A.D. Israel itself is rule by four governors: Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias. Israel is solidly ruled.

And the religious environment is solid as well. Annas and Caiaphas were high priests.

In one extended sentence we are given a snapshot of Israel’s political and the religious world. But that’s not all that’s important. Luke says further, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Isn’t that the best?! Be careful, politicians, if you think you own the world. Be careful, clergy, if you think you own the world.

“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” John was in the wilderness. John was out and about. He was a preacher without a building. But people showed up. He was here. He was there. And people found him.

As best we know, his message wasn’t fancy. But it was real. It hit home to his listeners. He proclaimed a baptism of repentance. He proclaimed a message of life-change. He proclaimed a message of forgiveness of sins. Oh, but to just straighten our lives out and to know we would be forgiven.

John the Baptist is before us. He was in the wilderness. But the text gets more specific than that. He was in the region around the Jordan----the Jordan River.

Can you connect the dots? We have history happening here. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 430 years. After Egypt they spent 40 years in the wilderness where they were fed manna in the morning and quails in the evening.

Finally, Joshua leads the Israelites into a land of their own. And they pass through the Jordan River. The Jordan marked their starting place in Israel. Today the Jordan marks a place of a new start. “Prepare for the coming of the Lord, the Messiah.”

He went into all the region around the Jordan. He was “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.” Prepare. Prepare. Prepare.

We prepare for a job interview. If a person isn’t prepared, it’s over. We prepare for the arrival of dinner guests. Hospitality is in the preparation. Choirs prepare. Teachers prepare. Farmers prepare. Parents prepare for the arrival of a new one. Students prepare for tests.

How does one prepare for an encounter with God? John says first, ‘repent.’ None of us is pure. None of us is altogether holy. None of us has reached a stage of perfection. In the words of Paul, “The good that I would, I do not; and the evil that I would not, I do.”

John is before us, and the words that capture his ministry were from the book of Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. 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, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Do those words speak to you? **Every valley shall be filled**. What does your valley look like? Is your valley, depression? Is it scorn? Is it guilt? Is it death? “**Every valley shall be filled.”** “**Every mountain and hill shall be made low.**” What does your mountain look like? Do you struggle with pride? Are things just not right at work? **“Every mountain and hill shall be made low.”** And then, “**the crooked shall be made straight, the rough places made smooth**.” What is crooked? What is rough? Racism is real. Mental illness is real. Our struggles with sexuality are real. **“The crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places made smooth.”**

And what comes last? “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

George Frederick Handel years ago composed this magnificent piece of music entitled The Messiah. It’s the best. It’s just the best. One of the solos in the Messiah is entitled, “Prepare the Way of the Lord.” It is sung by a male soloist. “Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. The crooked shall be made straight. The rough ways made smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Handel once directed the *Messiah* in Scotland. The Earl of Kinnoull was at the performance and afterward he told Handel that it was wonderful entertainment. Handel was taken aback. He is said to have responded, “I should be sorry if it only entertained you. I was hoping for something more.”

Entertainment brings pleasure to us. We love to be entertained. But Isaiah and John the Baptist and Handel meant for these words to be meditated upon. They are words that were meant to shape and transform us. And they are meant to transform the world.

Is it possible for the Word of God still to be heard? “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth. The crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places made smooth.”

It is a high calling for you, people of faith. We do not live to ourselves. We do not die to ourselves. We live to be transformed from one degree of glory to another, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.