

## **Sermon: Prepare the Way**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, on Dec 8, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Advent is a season of preparation. In our homes, people are buying trees, putting out decorations, cleaning and clearing rooms, baking delicious treats, all in preparation to host guests, to attend parties, or simply getting ready for Christmas. But the Lectionary text each year interrupts us, bringing to us John the Baptist, who interrupts our busyness, our priorities, our schedules, and forces us to examine and re-examine ourselves, the society we have built, the world we now live in. The preparation that John envisions is of a different kind, the kind that demands us to get ready for Jesus.

Prepare the way of the Lord, says John the Baptist. According to the author of the Gospel of Luke, the message of John interrupted his world as well. Unlike mythologies of ancient cultures whose heroic figures seem to float in timelessness, the advent of John and Jesus is set in historical time and space, and functioned within a specific cultural context. During the reign of Caesar Tiberius—the Roman emperor; of Pontius Pilate—the governor of Judea; of Herod Antipas in Galilee—son of Herod the Great; and of his brother Philip—the ruler of Traconitis.

Onto this list, two Jewish religious leaders were named as well, of Annas and Caiaphas, under the singular term of ‘high priest’. Annas was the head of a priestly family, with five sons, all were high priests as well, taking turns with short tenures. However, it was Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas who rose to real prominence. Throwing all these powers and principalities together can only mean tension and trouble, of a complex mixture of geopolitical intrigues. Into such a historical context came the word of God to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Prepare the way of the Lord, says John son of Zechariah. The responsive reading today contains words of Zechariah, the father of John. He was a minor priest whose mouth was sealed by angel of the Lord, for disbelieving that God was to open the womb of his wife Elizebeth at her ripe-old-age. So for nine months he could not utter a word, until Elizebeth finally gave birth to their son, John. At that moment, Zechariah’s mouth was

finally opened, he blessed the Lord God of Israel, and praised God for sending to the people a mighty saviour, in accordance with the holy covenant the promise of old.

He then look at the child before him, and said, *“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

Prepare the way of the Lord, says John. Out of the wilderness he came, in accordance with the prophetic tradition of Israel, of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and of Malachi, who was sent as God’s messenger, to prepare the way of the Lord. The ministry of Malachi was like a refiner’s fire and like washers’ soap. He was sent to purify the descendants of Levi, whose task were to serve God in the temple of the Lord. In another word, Malachi came to clean house—the house of God—so that servants of the Lord will be righteous before God, and their offerings would then be acceptable to the Lord Most High.

In today’s context, it is a message aimed for the Church, those who are tasked with specific roles with specific titles—ministers, elders, deacons, teachers, evangelists and so on. The message is simple, re-examine your conducts, clean up your own acts, put away away your hypocrisy and walk with integrity. For the days are surely coming when the Lord God will sent a refining fire and purify your rank, so the dross will be burned up and only gold and silver will remain.

Prepare the way of the Lord, says the Baptistizer. This message came not to emperor nor to governors, not even high priest. It came to John, an lowly itinerant preacher, preaching out of the wilderness. God sent the message to John, not in Rome, not in Jerusalem, not in any seat of power, but out in the wilderness. Wilderness is a scary and dangerous place, wild beasts live in there. It is also a place where, according to the biblical stories, people encounter God.

The Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness; Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness. Out of the wilderness came a unified nation ready to receive the Promised Land; out of the wilderness came a saviour ready to show us the Kingdom. Wilderness itself is more than a geographical area, it is a spiritual arena where we encounter the divine and are made ready for what God has prepared.

Prepare the way of the Lord, says the Baptist, and makes his paths straight. John envisioned a time when mountains are flattened and valleys raised, rough ways made smooth and crooked roads made straight. Now, a hundred years ago, such a vision would be hard to fathom, but human ingenuity has really taken great strides. Our engineers and construction crews are now able to build bridges across chasm, tunnels through mountains, bullet trains that travel in excess of hundred of kilometres per hour. What humanity could achieve collectively is marvellous.

But John is not talking engineering, he is projecting an eschatological vision of the coming kingdom of God, that is quickly approaching, taking shape until one day, all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Prepare the way of the Lord, says John. He went into regions around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The word 'repentance' in Greek is *metanoia*, which means 'to change one's mind' or 'to change one's inner being'. The word 'forgiveness' in Greek is *aphesis*, which means 'a release', 'a letting go'. The initiative to repent is not a legalistic stipulation but rather a door to forgiveness. Only God can forgive! By letting go and by releasing us from our sin, debt, or trespass, God invites us to change our mind, our inner most being.

John Calvin the Reformist, in his commentary on this passage, took pains to convince his readers that they find the good news rather than the law in the message of John the Baptist. This is what Calvin wrote, "For John does not say 'Repent ye, and in this way the kingdom of heaven will afterwards be at hand; but first brings forward the grace of God, and then exhorts men to repent. Hence it is evident, that the foundation of repentance is the mercy of God, by which he restores the lost."

Tertullian, the early Church Father, saw the same gospel truth: that call for "repentance should...prepare the home of the heart, by making it clean, for the Holy Spirit, who was about to (not intervene, but) supervene", that is to transform irrevocably from within.

Prepare the way of the Lord, says John the Baptist. Outside the church people are drinking eggnog with their neighbours, singing Christmas jingles in elevators, awaiting the coming of Santa Claus. But in worship, the people of God are making a different kind of preparation, by heeding the challenging words of John.

The Baptizer and his message of repentance appears in the Advent lectionary reading each year, compelling preachers and hearers alike to listen and to respond. Our repentance and our turning around involves not

only self-re-examination, but to look closely at structures and systems of the world around us in new and different ways.

Whose job is it to fill the valley, to level the mountain, to make straight rough and crooked ways? I don't think it's all God's job, but a shared ministry. As God chose the lowly John out of the wilderness, God can choose and use lowly individuals like you and I, as messengers and instruments of peace, to prepare the way for, and to welcome Jesus, the true Prince of Peace.

I read in the news a few days ago that the Quebec Premier Francois Legault is going to ban prayers in public spaces, and he is prepared to invoke the 'not-withstanding clause' in the Constitution to head off any court challenge against his ill-thought out plan to restrict religious freedom. Something deeply disturbing is happening in that province, and the call of 'laicity' or state affirmed secularism is becoming more militant, more radical with an undeniable racist undertone. I don't know if it will actually be enacted, but if it does, I might just go across the bridge to Gatineau, and stand in front of the city hall, and simply pray. We will see what happens then.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**