

SERMON TITLE: "Prepare the Way"  
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 3:1-12  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: December 4, 2016, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

If you did a study where you categorized and quantified people's conversations, I would guess that, throughout the year, the most common small talk would be about the weather or sports, or in this election year, about politics. During the season of Advent, however, I would guess that another kind of conversation would rank close to the top. It usually goes like this:

"So, Becky, do you have your Christmas shopping done yet?"

"Are you kidding, Sally? I haven't even finished my Christmas cards!"

"I finally got mine into the mail yesterday, thank goodness. But we haven't put up a single decoration yet, other than the wreath on the door.

"The kids helped set up our tree right after Thanksgiving, and Joe put up the outside lights yesterday. But now I really have to get started on my holiday baking, or I'll never be ready for that big Christmas party this weekend."

"I know what you mean. We have company coming, so I've got to get the house cleaned and the extra beds made. It just seems like there's no way I'll be ready in time!"

The big question on a lot of our minds this time of year is, "How can we be prepared for Christmas?" Fortunately for us, today's scripture from Matthew 3 speaks to this very issue. John the Baptist wasn't hanging Christmas lights, wrapping presents, or even practicing lines for a Christmas pageant, but he was calling the people to get ready for a fresh experience of God, incarnate in the world and in our hearts. So let's listen to John's proclamation. In these few precious weeks before Christmas, let's see how we, too, can prepare the way of the Lord.

### **1—REPENT OF OUR SINS**

Right away in these verses, we see that John's message was simple and straight forward. The first and most obvious step for us to prepare the way of the Lord is to repent of our sins. The wilderness prophet who wore clothing of camel's hair and leather and survived on wild honey and bugs didn't mince words or soft pedal. He didn't worry about being politically correct or about whom he might offend. He

told it like it was. Standing out in the desert alongside the Jordan River, John told the people that they needed to confess their wrongdoing and turn their lives around.

John wanted his people to recognize that the kingdom of heaven had come near. But the only way they could see, hear, feel, and know that God was on the throne was to clear a path through the debris. It was time, indicated John, for destructive habits and unbeneficial behaviors to be put away, like an unproductive tree would be chopped down and thrown in a fire. It was time, proclaimed John, for the trash to be burned up like the inedible chaff of the wheat plant. John would have agreed with the Apostle Paul's urgency that "Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"<sup>1</sup> For those coming to the river to witness this wild and woolly baptizing preacher, John's message was crucial and clear: Stop doing what's wrong. Stop it now. Repent of your sins.

John wasn't talking about any weak-willed, pretend repentance either. The Jordan River was no place for half-hearted apologies. Feeling guilt and regret are good beginnings, but when John the Baptist told his listeners that they needed to repent, he meant a 180-degree turn around. He was calling for serious change that would be evident in the lives of those who were baptized. If they were sincerely sorry for the ways they had thought, spoken, and acted, then their lives would give evidence of real change. Bad branches and fruit would be pruned off and good fruit would grow instead.

Some of you may have noticed that the outside of our church looks different now than it did a month ago. There are white caulk lines on the edges of the siding boards. That caulking was done to help prevent any more water damage from occurring. In the spring, when the weather warms up, a crew will finish the caulking, apply a layer of sealer primer, and then they'll repaint all the exterior.

Our church situation reminds me of a story I heard a long time ago about a man who volunteered to paint the outside of his church. The Trustees had approved the project and had given the man permission to go to a hardware store and buy all the paint he would need. But the volunteer, not wanting to spend too much of the church's money, bought only about half as much paint as he should have. He

stretched the paint by adding thinner. As the paint ran low, he added more and more thinner until he finished the job. Everything seemed fine until a rainstorm came up and washed the paint off the building. Then the pastor had no choice but to demand the volunteer to “Repaint and thin no more!”<sup>2</sup>

## **2—ALLOW OURSELVES TO RECEIVE GOD’S FORGIVING HELP**

That’s what John the Baptist was trying to say. The first step in preparing the way of the Lord is to repent of our sins. Of course, the “thin no more” part is important too. And that’s why there’s a second step in preparing the way of the Lord. We need to allow ourselves to receive God’s forgiving help.

I’ll grant you that receiving forgiveness isn’t always easy. Sometimes we have trouble letting go of our guilt. We’re afraid that God and other people are still counting our sins against us. That sense that we’re still suffering from sin and its consequences makes it hard for us to embrace God’s good possibilities. After going to the depths of sin and despair, it’s hard to believe that there’s a way to rise up.

If we’re caught in that dilemma, struggling to move forward, wrestling with how exactly to make a straight path for God, John the Baptist’s harsh words and coarse demeanor might not seem like much help. With his “brood of vipers” name-calling, he doesn’t seem very encouraging or merciful. In fact, Matthew’s gospel doesn’t provide a single word in these verses about forgiveness or God’s powerful grace and love.

Yet, it’s interesting that John the Baptist was quoting from Isaiah 40. The book of Isaiah is 66 chapters long, and Bible scholars are confident that the first 39 chapters were written before the Babylonian Exile. The prophetic voice of that “First” Isaiah called for the people to repent of their sins and thus prevent the downfall of their nation. Despite the Prophet’s pleas, however, mistakes were made, Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon in 587 BCE, and many of the Jews were taken as exiles. In reflection, the Jews perceived their exile as God’s punishment for their sin.

Bible scholars tell us that Isaiah 40 and following was written many years later by someone else. Times and circumstances had changed. King Cyrus of Persia had, by then, conquered Babylon, and was

releasing the Jews to return home to Judah. Thus, that “Second” Isaiah’s message was one of consolation and comfort. After 50 years or so in Babylonian exile, the Jewish people had paid the price for their sinful ways; they had suffered the full consequences of their rebellion; they had served their sentence; their term was over. Now was a time of new beginnings. Now was time to lay to rest the guilt, pain, and grief of the past and move on to a positive future. Now was the time to make a straight highway in the desert. Now was the time to see the vision of the new Jerusalem that the returning exiles would rebuild. Now was the time to accept God’s forgiveness and start their lives over again, fresh and new.

It seems amazing to me that anybody would hold on to their guilt, but I know some people do. In my work as a pastor, I’ve experienced time and again persons who grow distant from the church not because of a problem with the church but because of their own sense of inadequacy or unworthiness. They’re embarrassed about a problem they have or a problem in their family, and they’re afraid that God won’t be able to forgive them. Maybe it’s a divorce or a child who lives an alternative lifestyle. Maybe it’s a financial crisis or a habit that has turned into an addiction. The problem becomes so emotionally consuming that it’s hard to imagine that God could really forgive them. So the people distance themselves from the church and those Christian brothers and sisters who could offer help and support.

In order for God to take away our guilt, we have to be willing to let it go. We have to confess it and repent of it and allow God to forgive us. God does want to forgive us, you know. God isn’t nearly so concerned about punishment as we think; we usually bring enough of that on ourselves. Like Isaiah 40 said, we pay double for all our sins. What God wants to do is rescue us from punishment. God wants to throw out the lifeline and pull us to safety. God wants to lift us up and give us a second chance. But God can only do that if we allow ourselves be forgiven.

In just a few minutes, we’ll be serving communion, and I’m going to ask you to come up to the front and receive the bread and the grape juice, the body and blood of Christ. These sacred elements are signs to us of God’s grace and mercy. They are tangible proofs of God’s deep desire to forgive our sins.

God has provided this forgiveness in abundance. You don't have to be bashful. God's forgiveness is here for the taking. Prepare the way of the Lord. Allow yourself to receive God's forgiving help.

### **CONCLUSION**

There's a story about a father who asked his young daughter what she wanted for Christmas.

Knowing that her mother was expecting a baby soon, the little girl replied, "For Christmas, I want a baby brother." To everyone's delight, the mother came home from the hospital on Christmas Eve carrying a baby boy in her arms.

The next week, the father said to his daughter, "And what would you like for Christmas next year?"

After some careful thought, the little girl replied, "Well, if it wouldn't be too uncomfortable for Mom, I'd like a pony."<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to preparing for Christmas, there are some things we can control and some things we can't. It's easy to get stressed out and frustrated over all the things we don't have time or ability to do. But God doesn't care so much about those things. What God does care about is that we prepare the way of the Lord in our own hearts and lives—something we can begin to do right now. When we repent of our sin and allow ourselves receive God's forgiving help, that's when we truly prepare the way.

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<sup>1</sup>2 Corinthians 6:2.

<sup>2</sup>Paraphrased from Tal D. Bonham, *The Treasury of Clean Church Jokes* (Broadman Press: Nashville, 1986), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Paraphrased from Eric W. Johnson, ed., *A Treasury of Humor* (Ivy Books: New York, 1989), p. 36.