

SERMON TITLE: "Preparing the Way"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 3:1-6
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 28, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Because my mom moved from Montana to Ogden this fall, she wanted to send out her holiday mail early, so she could let all her far-away relatives and friends know her new address. So, a few weeks ago, Mom and I went shopping for Christmas stationery and Christmas stamps. Then Mom got busy typing up her letter about this new phase of her life. I helped Mom update her mailing list in an Excel spreadsheet. We removed some names because the people had died, and we had to do some research on others to get their current addresses. Because I so rarely create mailing labels, I had to pull up a YouTube video tutorial to remind me how to do that. Over several days, Mom stuck on labels, wrote personalized notes, folded letters, and stuffed and sealed her envelopes. Then I carried them off to be mailed.

Now Mom can breathe easy, knowing that she's done with that major part of her Christmas preparations. For me personally, however, it's a different story: not a letter or card or Christmas email yet written. And—in spite of all the supply chain warnings—I've hardly begun my Christmas shopping. All those preparations are yet to be done.

Putting up decorations, sending out cards, and buying presents all contribute to our holiday cheer. But there's also a spiritual side of getting ready for Christ's birth. Just like a recipe for baking holiday cookies, today's gospel reading about John the Baptist gives us some helpful hints about preparing the way.

1—MAKE STRAIGHT PATHS

The first step in John's readiness plan is to make straight paths. Quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, John is making the point that God is about to do something wonderful, and we don't

want anything to keep us from seeing it. No steep hill or deep valley should prevent us from traveling to that sacred place. No crooked road should detour us away from this great thing which God is about to do. If Isaiah had lived on my street, he would have added that no giant pothole should throw off our alignment and steer us away from the salvation of God which was coming. Let's fill those holes and smooth out the path, says Isaiah, so nothing will prevent us from seeing what God has in store.

In Isaiah's time, when these words were first spoken, the divine wonder was going to be the long-awaited return of the Jewish exiles to their home in Israel. What a day of rejoicing that would be! When John the Baptist quoted these verses several centuries later, he was referring to the coming of the Jewish messiah. When we hear these images today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we recognize them as a cue to get ready for the birth of the Christian Savior. This wonder that's coming will be so spectacular that we certainly won't want to miss it. We won't want Christmas shopping or parties or decorating to get in our way. Nor do we want to let responsibilities at work or school or even with our families detour us from seeing God born in the flesh.

We need this kind of personal spiritual connection, for the sanity of our souls. If that means taking some time-outs for prayer, Bible reading, and worship, then—by all means—let's do it! Making straight paths to God is the first step in preparing the way.

2—PROCLAIM A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE

At this time of year, it's easy to blame holiday busy-ness for our lack of attention to spiritual things. But hanging lights on the eaves of our houses or spending our time and money shopping aren't the only ways our paths get diverted. John the Baptist was talking about sin. He was suggesting that, in order to be ready for the coming of the Lord, we have to clean up our act. In his preaching, John gave some specific examples about selfish greed, abuse of power, and marital unfaithfulness. In fact, the reason why John the Baptist was beheaded was that he called people on the carpet and told them that they needed to repent.

Preparing the way for Christ means being sorry for the wrong we have done. Preparing the way for Christ means turning away from bad behaviors and improper attitudes and desires. Preparing the way for Christ means changing the way we live.

When I was a teenager, I had a Catholic friend who explained to me the beauty of the Catholic faith. “You go to confession and say you’re sorry for what you’ve done,” she said. “Then once you’re forgiven, you can go and do that same wrong thing again and again.” She was teasing, of course. She knew that wasn’t what the Catholic Church really taught. But that *is* how we Christians tend to act sometimes. We say we’re sorry, but then we keep on doing what’s wrong anyway. True repentance, on the other hand, means being sorry enough that we won’t want to do that misbehavior ever again.

Maybe you’ve heard the story of the two well-meaning church members who decided to paint the outside of their church. They knew their church didn’t have much money, so they bought only a small quantity of paint and thinned it down so they could stretch it further. The two men finished painting the church and commended themselves for being such good stewards of the church’s money. Unfortunately, a big rainstorm came along and washed the paint off the church. When their minister saw what happened, he said to the two church members, “Repaint, and thin no more!”

When we repent *and sin no more*, we will be preparing the way of the Lord.

3—PREPARING THROUGH FORGIVENESS

When John the Baptist called people to a baptism of repentance, he was also preaching to them about forgiveness. Preparing the way of the Lord means accepting God’s mercy for ourselves and offering that forgiveness to others.

I think many of us have hang-ups with this third step in the preparation process. Some of us are so good at recognizing our faults and feeling guilty that we have a hard time accepting God’s love and mercy. We don’t have confidence that God has forgiven us through Jesus Christ. We’re always waiting for the divine shoe to drop.

At the time of Jesus' birth, most people had no idea who he was or who he would become. One of the advantages we have today is that we know the rest of the Jesus story. Every year when we prepare for Christmas, we already know that God, who came as a baby, also died for our sins on the cross and rose victorious over sin and death. We know that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is infinitely greater than any wrong we could ever do. We know that forgiveness is possible no matter who we are or what sin we commit.

At least we know it in our heads. The trick is absorbing it in our spirits, so that forgiveness permeates our attitudes and perspectives on life.

And forgiveness isn't just for ourselves either. Forgiveness is for us to share with others. Preparing the way of the Lord means offering mercy to our brothers and sisters, our parents, our children, our neighbors, and our co-workers. When we get together for holidays, sometimes we get on each other's nerves more than usual. But if we let that frustrate us, if we let personality conflicts bother us, if we let someone's idiosyncrasies irritate us to the point of anger or bad feelings, then how will we possibly be prepared for Christ's coming?

Preparing the way of the Lord means forgiving the people in your life who need to be forgiven. It means clearing the air, by letting bygones be bygones. Accepting God's forgiveness for yourself and then sharing that mercy with others is an essential part of preparing the way.

You remember how it is with Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. He's so unkind to his employee, so unloving to his family members, and so harsh with everyone else. But when Scrooge becomes sorry for what he's done and realizes that forgiveness is still possible, then he wants to share that mercy with everyone around him. Buying a goose for Bob Cratchit's family is Scrooge's sign of forgiveness and his means of preparing the way of the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Every year during Advent we read about John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ. Since John was supposedly just a few months older than his cousin Jesus, John couldn't do much in advance of Jesus' birth. But before the adult Jesus took to preaching, healing, and gathering disciples, John was already standing out along the Jordan River, calling people to prepare the way of the Lord. John's ministry made such a splash that some people thought he was the messiah. But John told them, No, they should expect someone more powerful than he, someone who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John's job was preparing the way. That meant getting other people ready for the messiah's coming. That's why John proclaimed the message that he did, and that's why John's message is still relevant for us today—as we continue to anticipate the coming of Christ into the world. By making straight paths to God, by repenting of our sins, and by accepting and offering forgiveness, we too will be preparing the way.