

Prepare the Way for the Coming Messiah

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Today, the reading from the Gospel of St. Matthew sets the stage for the coming Jesus. It is written after the birth narrative and anticipates the ministry of Jesus. It speaks to us, in this Advent Season, of preparing for the celebration of the Nativity (His first coming) and the Second Coming of our Lord.

Matthew quotes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in Chapter 40:35, saying "The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." St. Matthew seems to use these words of Isaiah as his description of John.

Matthew does not tell of the miraculous birth of John. That is found in the Gospel of Luke. There, we learn that John was the son of two very old parents. Both were beyond child-bearing years and had no children. However, his parents were righteous people in the sight of God and God blessed by giving them a child. A male child. The angel, Gabriel, told his father he was be named John, a contraction of the Hebrew name "*yoch anan*" which means "the Lord has shown favor" or "God's gift." The angel told his father that, 1) He would be great; 2) He would be filled with the Holy Spirit; 3) He would turn the hearts of many of God's people back to Him; 4) He would have the spirit of the Old Testament prophet Elijah; 5) He was not to drink wine or strong drink; and 6) He would prepare the people for the Lord. In Luke 1:80, St. Luke closes his birth narrative of John with the words, "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel."

That is where we find John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, today, preaching in the wilderness, just like Old Testament Elijah his prototype.

- Both of them preached repentance when Israel had turned from God (See 1 Kings 18:21).
- Both of them were non-conformists regarding their wardrobe. No silks and satins (See 2 Kings 1:7-8). An animal skin with the hair still on it and a leather belt.
- Both of them ate food provided by God from the desert “grocery store” where they lived (See 1 Kings 17:2-3).
- Both of them preached against the hypocrisy of their day. Elijah against King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, and her god Baal (See 2 Kings 1:16). John railed against the Pharisees and Sadducees who believed in works and their heritage not confession and repentance.
- Both of them condemned the behavior of evil kings. Elijah confronted King Ahab. John confronted King Herod. One for allowing Baal worship and the other for adultery.
- Both of them suffered at the hands of wicked queens. Queen Jezebel wanted to take Elijah’s life and Herodias connived with her daughter, Salome, to have Herod take John’s life.
- Both of them suffered from depression and doubt (See 1 Kings 19:4 and Matthew 11:4).

John, like his forerunner, Elijah was quite distinctive in his appearance, living arrangements, food, and method of preaching. Neither of them wore clothes that were fashion statements, and the smell was probably not attractive to those around them. John baptized people while wearing camel hair, which had to be smelly, and even more so when it got wet in the Jordan River.

Honey and bugs do not sound like an appetizing meal and a beard would have been a great catch-all for stray locust legs.

Neither man had curb appeal, but Elijah's miracles drew people to the Lord. He showed Israel who God really was. The people had been so indoctrinated into idol worship, they had forgotten about Jehovah and His power. But the nation turned and bowed to God saying, "The Lord is God" after the spectacular burning of a sacrifice on an altar that was, itself, consumed by fire and the prophets of Baal were destroyed.

John's words were what attracted sinners to the Jordan River to be baptized. Elijah anointed his predecessor Elisha at the Jordan River after which Elijah was taken into a whirlwind into heaven, one of two men in the Old Testament who did not physically die. John's baptized Jesus in that same Jordan River with the Holy Spirit. John may have been related to Jesus and maybe being a cousin.

Elijah and John were not great because of their appearance, but because of their daring messages. The powerful preaching of Elijah and John caused people to repent. John (and Elijah in the past) were the advance men for Jesus. An advance man is the one who precedes someone or something and promotes them causing people to be attracted to them.

We have many examples of preliminary things that anticipate the real thing. Hors d'oeuvres are an example. They are those first dishes that are meant to stimulate your appetite for the main course, such as bruschetta, deviled eggs, shrimp cocktail, and stuffed mushrooms. Are your mouths watering yet? See it works.

High school students have the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test, or the PSAT, to give them an idea of what to expect on the forthcoming Scholastic Aptitude Test, the SAT and ACT. The PSAT gives an idea of what to expect on the SAT or ACT.

When TV sit-coms are taped in a studio “before a live audience”, a warm-up comedian usually opens the show, greets the audience, and does their best to get the audience excited for what’s to come so they laugh and respond to the actors in the segment. The cast member of I Love Lucy were the warm-up comics for filming that show. And Robin Williams warmed up audiences for Mork and Mindy. Can you imagine how lighthearted you might feel after their zany performances? They set the stage and prepared the audience for the coming show.

At concerts, there are bands that are called “openers” and sometimes warm-up bands upstage the headliners. That happened in 1967 in Portland, Oregon when Herman’s Hermits upstaged the Who and in 1991 when Garth Brooks upstaged The Judds, Naomi and Wynonna, in Tacoma, Washington.

John did not upstage Jesus. John had a specific job to do. He was to prepare the way – to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming Messiah, Jesus. He had a big task. His job was an ancient task. The hyperbole for this comes from Isaiah 40:3-4. In ancient times, roads were not the paved, smooth, or straight avenues of travel like we have in our world. They were often winding, (following the pathways of herd animals), the best of them were often damaged, rough, uneven. Without maintenance, like we have, they were muddy from rain, washed out by flooding, dusty from heat, and deeply rutted from constant treading by camels, sheep, goats, cattle, people, and armies.

When an important person was due to come for a visit, a king or queen or conquering general, a designated person, similar to a herald or crier, would be sent to announce the anticipated arrival of this dignitary and with his coming motivate the people to, literally, preparing the way (the road). That meant, making repairs to the road. Leveling it and smoothing it at places where

it had washed out or become rutted and impassable. It meant realigning it so it was straighter, clearing debris and rocks and filling in holes. All of this work was to create a smoother, straighter path for the coming dignitary.

This is the imagery that applied to John. He was the herald. He was the crier out in the wilderness calling the people to confess their sins, to repent, and to be baptized (ceremonially washed). He was calling the people to prepare for way, for the plan of God, that was to be fulfilled in the approaching Messiah, Jesus. And, today, he speaks to us as we look forward to the Second Coming of Jesus.

John was the last Old Testament prophet and the first New Testament prophet. There had been a period of 400 years of silence from God since the days of Malachi who, himself, had called God's people to repent. No prophet arose for all those years until John came on the scene. His message proclaimed the coming, the Advent, of the Lord in grace and in judgment. The people thronged to him from Jerusalem, Judea, and the area around the Jordan River. John saw the sinful rebellion of the people and their idolatry. What he saw caused him to prepare the people. His task was to make sure that the Messiah, Jesus, would not find a barren wilderness of sin but rather a people waiting in anxious anticipation for the arrival of their Savior. (The same could be said for us at this time, too.) Absent any word from God through his prophets for 400 years, the people were anxiously waiting, with hope, for the one who would deliver them from sin, death, and Satan forever. John was the front man. John was the warm-up act. John was the opener. John was the hors d'oeuvre before the main course, whetting the appetite of the people to receive their Savior.

If John the Baptist thought the spiritual conditions of 1st Century Israel were challenging, imagine what he would think

is he were preaching in the spiritual wilderness of the 21st Century. We have a whole menu of false religions from Islam to Buddhism to New Age. A huge number of people practice no religion. A significant number of Christian churches do not accept the written Word of God as the basis for their doctrine and practice. And it is not only those “other” people who have crooked paths. We must look into our own hearts this Advent season as well. We need to accept the fact that John is preaching to us too. John preaches three things.

The first word of his sermon is “repent.” Just as Lent is a season for preparation and spiritual refreshment for us Christians, so is Advent. It is a time to honestly quit kidding ourselves about how good we have been and holy we’ve become, like the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to scoff at John. We need to see the crookedness of our live. Like them, we need to recognize our sinfulness – in thought, word and deed, not just saying the words but really taking them to heart in confession. Being repentant does not mean just being contrite or sorry for your sins. Being repentant also encompasses faith, that is, truly believing in God’s grace for the sake of Christ’s saving work. Contrition without faith through the power of the Holy Spirit is a dead end. Do you hear John?

Three simple words that most people, including many Christians, find difficult to say are, “I am sorry.” Advent is a time for us to be honest with God and one another by confessing our wrongs, by confessing our sins and by sincerely saying, “I am sorry.” In response to the words of John, repentance makes us ready for the Savior.

John baptized people in a ceremonial rite based on repentance. John made it clear that was not the baptism with which we are baptized. We have been baptized in the Christ Jesus (with Holy Spirit and fire John said). So, a second way that we prepare for

the arrival of our Savior is by living in our Baptismal grace. John's baptism laid the foundation for the baptism instituted by Jesus. It was a tangible way for people to receive the forgiveness of God. It was a one-time washing that brought forgiveness.

You and I have received the baptism that John described, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. In this baptism, we were united with Christ Himself into his saving grace, his obedient life, his death as a payment for sin, and his glorious resurrection. Living in that grace, claiming, and treasuring it, and living in its power and peace is another way that we can prepare for the coming Savior.

Finally, John tells of another way that we can prepare for the coming Savior. In v. 8, he says "bear the fruit of repentance." We prepare for the coming of Christ by bearing the fruit of the repentance that is worked in and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such fruit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. None of these are possible by for us to show because of our human nature but all are possible by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. And John tells us, that neglecting to do so leads to condemnation.

At this time of the year, we are often overwhelmed by all the things we think we need to do to prepare for the celebration of the Nativity of our Savior. Greeting cards, gifts, menus, trees, outdoor decorations, wrapping paper, parties, cleaning, a Christmas wardrobe, travel plans, indoor decorations, and whatever else you feel you need to do. Imagine how overwhelmed John the Baptist was in his task of preparing all the people of Galilee and Judea for the coming of the Lord! He had to prepare the hearts of all those people for their Savior and

Redeemer! By comparison, his task makes those tasks that face you and I face seem plausible and miniscule (not as bad).

John told the people and us, that in our spiritual lives, we only need to do three things to prepare the way for Jesus this Advent Season:

- 1) repent and confess our sins (straightening up our lives);
- 2) living in our baptismal grace (leveling the way to our hearts); and
- 3) bearing the fruit of repentance by the power of the Holy Spirit (filling in the holes and repairing the ruts).

Doing so, opens our hearts and welcomes Jesus. Doing so, serves as an example to encourage others to seek their Savior too. It encourages them to experience the undeserved love of God in Christ Jesus that we demonstrate in our lives this Season of Advent. In this season when we open our hearts to the coming Savior of the world. In this season when we are prepared to receive him once again with joy and gladness. Hear the words of John this Season of Advent and let your heart be open and the road to it straight and true, as you prepare once again, to celebrate the coming of our Lord, Jesus at His Nativity. And just as importantly, as you prepare for his Second Coming at the end of time or the end of your temporal time.

In His name and to His glory. Amen.