

Sermon - December 4, 2016A - Advent 2

Prepare the way of the Lord

Matthew 3:1–12



Dear Friends in Christ,
I'm sure many of you have taken part in road opening, preparing and using it. What I mean is this, the time when farmers settled in their new homes or places, or when a subdivision or acreages were established, you had to prepare a road, the road to your home. It does take work doesn't it?

It might start like this (picture) but then you begin to clear the trees, make it wider, then gravel it, it will look something like this (picture) and it is good to go, useful, you can enjoy it. But if you had the resources, you might get it to this level (picture).

Whatever you did, or are doing, you agree, it does take work, and lots of work to make it workable, useful, even before you begin to build home or whatever other project you want to build. I remember when we had our first congregational camp at the Pippas property, Gary Goebel had to call the County so they can gravel the road to the land, so that campers would have no problem getting on the land. It does take work to prepare a road.

The same way with the coming of Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us we need to prepare a way for his coming.

And what John the Baptist is doing in our Gospel reading for this morning, is exactly that, he is preparing "the way of the Lord" (Mt 3:3). His preaching and the baptism he was baptizing people with, was so that his hearers, so that his people would prepare because the Lord was coming in grace and judgment, people needed to be ready.

Due to the sinful rebellion and idolatry of God's people, it was almost as if God's path to return to his people had become a dangerous wilderness of rough terrain! It was John's purpose to get the people ready for that coming so that the Christ would not find a muddy wilderness where his people were stuck, but rather a people waiting in eager expectation for his arrival to deliver them from sin. John was there to prepare Christ's path.

Now, the spiritual conditions in which John the Baptist had to preach was challenging back then even though the Jews already thought of themselves to be God's people. But if it was so, I wonder what John would think of today's conditions, if he were to preach in the spiritual wilderness of twenty-first-century Canada.

We have the whole menu of false religions from Islam to Mormons, to Jehovah Witness. From the huge segment of the population that practices no religion, to the significant portion of Christian by name only, to churches that deny or don't preach the

central beliefs of the faith such as justification by faith alone and the resurrection of the body. It is specifically because of these challenges that this account of John the Baptist continues to contain an important message for the Church. As we look at this text again this Advent season, we the Church continue John the Baptist's important work in Advent: Prepare Christ's path!

I. By repenting and confessing your sins.

But, how do we prepare Christ's path? That's the question we need to answer this morning. And the Gospel shows us three important ways to preparing Christ's path.

The first way is the central word in John the Baptist's preaching, that is "repent." Lent and Advent are seasons of preparation and spiritual refreshment for Christians, and at the center of that spiritual refreshment is repentance. Advent is a time to quit kidding ourselves about how good we are, and honestly recognize our sins—in thought, word, and deed—and repent.

John the Baptist did not sugarcoat his condemnation of sin, he told people straight up deep they were stuck in the mud without the grace of God. But to repent does not mean just being sorry for our sins, it does take faith in God's grace to forgive sins, and does take the work of the Holy Spirit. For without the Holy Spirit who works in us the miracle of faith, sorrow for sin is a dead end. But with faith in Christ and his work of on the cross of Calvary, we do receive God's gracious work in Jesus in the form of forgiveness and also to bring God's reign back to this sinful earth, his Kingdom being established here and now! But so that Kingdom gets established we need to repent, and Advent is a special time for us Christians to repent and call the unbelieving world to repent as well.

Three simple words that most people, including many Christians actually, find difficult to say are "I am sorry." When we do wrong against God or someone else, we would rather yell, scream, and argue that is not our fault than tell God or that person, "I am sorry." Actually, blaming others is the easiest way to get out of the circumstance, right? It's never our fault for our wrong doings but others..... Yes, it used to be that when our children had lower marks in school we chided them, we talked to them, but now who do we blame? The teacher!

People are leaving the Church, who do they blame? Other people, many times innocently! Or maybe not, but still we blame others. Maybe not people, but we blame the things we don't like as if the external things were God's grace, no we never find fault in us, but in others or things. There is no recognition of our sins, let alone repentance. And even when we do recognize it, there is no repentance, and if there is there is no genuine repentance.

The evidence of repentance, of faith worked by the Holy Spirit, which we see in our Gospel, is confession of sins. Advent is a time for us to be honest with God and one another by confessing our wrongs, our sin. Advent is a time for us to come clean with each other, to recognize that maybe our speech, our attitudes or our temperaments have caused sins against others and do something about it, repent and confess. It is time to consider our own faults, repent and confess them. It is time to stop blaming others!

After all confession of sin is the rhythm of life for a Christian, a Christian should be characterized by that confession and forgiveness. Advent is a time to make sure that we are back in that rhythm of confessing our sins to God and one another.

II. By living in baptismal grace.

The second way to preparing Christ's path that's revealed in our Gospel is to live in your baptismal grace. What is that mean? It means you live in the gifts that baptism confers, that is the forgiveness of sins, a new life, and the gift of becoming a member God's family. It means you are now free from the condemnation of our sins, and free also to serve God, here in his Kingdom.

It's not a ritual but a life style. The Jews had many rituals of washing trying to seek purity from their sins, even to this day, they would have for example, mikvahs, or washing pools with steps where you could walk down into the water for ritual cleansing.

But John's Baptism was different; it was a one-time washing that brought forgiveness. It was a one-time sharing of God's forgiveness in a very tangible way. Just as people were plunged under the water, they were washed of their sin through Baptism. It was a Baptism that laid the foundation for the Christian Baptism you've received that is life changing.

And we continue to prepare the way for Christ in this Advent season as we live in and treasure our baptismal grace. John the Baptist said, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (v 11). As amazing as John the Baptist was with his preaching and Baptism, you have received the very preaching and Baptism of Jesus which is by far greater. When you were baptized, you received the Holy Spirit, who united you with all the saving work of Christ: his entire obedient life, his death as a payment for sin, and his resurrection victory! Therefore, an important aspect of preparing Christ's path is simply living in this baptismal grace, claiming and treasuring it, living in its power and peace, not just believing it in our minds, but our hearts as well, not just being able to know and say it, but actually living it out. Advent is a time to get back to the spiritual basics, and Baptism is one of those spiritual foundations in our lives.

III. By bearing the fruit of repentance.

The third way our Gospel shows us we need to prepare Christ's path is to "Bear the fruit of repentance!" (v 8).

This command sounds rather challenging as it is, but notice what happens if you don't do as commanded. John says: "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (v 10). But here is where it gets tough, If we are sinners, then how can poor trees like us produce good fruit?

But here is the Good News, remember that it is the Holy Spirit who works repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, so it is not us who will produce good fruit, but the Holy Spirit whom we have received abundantly in Baptism when we were united with Christ. What happens though is that we more often than not, oppose the work of the Holy Spirit. O yes, when we are not in God's word for whatever reason at home and Church, when we don't confess our sins in true repentance, when we think that everything is about us and not God, and when we neglect prayer, Church, the Sacraments, we do reject the Holy Spirit, or at least we don't allow the Holy Spirit to work in us. And if so, we cannot produce the fruits that are the mark of our

repentance such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. And we will always be spiritually blind, if not dying.

So, dear friends, we prepare Christ's path by bearing the fruit of faith for the world to see, fruit miraculously produced not by us, but by the Holy Spirit. We will reach our community as our vision says, we will have vibrant faith and by extension vibrant congregation.

Conclusion

John the Baptist must have been overwhelmed with his task—so much to do to prepare Galilee and Judea for Christ's coming. I can relate, and I'm sure you can too. But it all starts within each of us by repenting and confessing our sins, living in our baptismal grace, and bearing the fruit of repentance worked by the Holy Spirit. The path to our hearts is then wide open. We, in turn, want others to experience the undeserved love of God in Christ that we already have in these holy days of Advent. So we call them to repent and confess their sins, to be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit, and to bear the fruit of repentance the Holy Spirit produces. Prepare Christ's path—to your heart and to the hearts of others. Amen.