

“Prepare the Way”
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Isaiah 40:1-11

Luke 3:1-6

So, God is going to choose someone to bring a divine message, a message that all the world needs to hear. This is of supreme importance, so choosing the right messenger is imperative. Luke tells us about how this happened in chapter 3 of his Gospel. Here it is, “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius...” Yes, there it is – if you need an important message spread, you go straight to the top – the emperor. The Roman empire was the known world at the time, so the emperor was basically in charge of the world. Yes, the emperor seems like the right person for the job of spreading God’s message. Let’s see how God uses the emperor. Wait, the emperor isn’t mentioned anymore. The next phrase is “when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea...” OK, so maybe the emperor is too busy with everything else he’s got going on, so we’ll go to the governor. *He’ll* be the one to get God’s word out. But, no, we move right on past the governor to “...Herod was ruler of Galilee...” Now, we’re getting closer to the Jews, God’s chosen people, so maybe that local ruler will be the one God uses. But we keep moving, to Herod’s brother Philip, ruler of neighboring regions and then Lysanias, ruler of yet another region. And now we’re past all of the secular leaders, and we keep going.

Next, we hear about the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. OK, this makes sense. Skip the secular rulers, but use the religious leaders to spread God’s message. Of course! But we keep going past the high priests to finally get to the messenger that God will use. This messenger is not in the places of power and prestige, not in the temple, not even in *civilization*. Where do we find God’s messenger? In the wilderness. “...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” So, God’s messenger is this John, not a priest (though he is the son of a priest), not a high priest, not a ruler, not a governor, not the emperor. He’s really nobody important, and *this* is who God chooses to be the forerunner to the Messiah, who, by the way, will also be born into circumstances that are not what we would assume. But this really is God’s way – choosing the lowly over the lofty. As Paul put it, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

Since our God chooses the lowly over the lofty, we know where to look for what is important in God’s kingdom. I’m fairly certain the emperor is not here today. I don’t see the president or the governor here. I don’t see the pope or archbishops here. We who are more like John than Tiberius hear this story about a nobody who was used by God for mighty purposes, and we can find ourselves included in the mysterious story of God. How does this work? How do we attune ourselves to hearing the word of God come to us, in whatever wilderness we find ourselves? That is the message which John brings: we must prepare ourselves for the coming Lord. John quotes from the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his

paths straight.” This same line, quoted from Isaiah, is included in all four gospels. You’ll find it in Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, and John 1:23. The Gospels of Mark and John don’t even narrate the story of the birth of Christ, but *all four gospel authors* make sure to include the story of John, the forerunner of the Messiah. *Prepare. Make straight the way of the Lord.* Or, as *The Message* paraphrase puts it:

“Prepare God’s arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

Every ditch will be filled in,

Every bump smoothed out,

The detours straightened out,

All the ruts paved over.

Everyone will be there to see

The parade of God’s salvation.”

My uncle, a retired accountant and avid motorcycle rider, once told me about a road in my home state of Tennessee. It is officially U.S. Route 129, but it is known as the “Tail of the Dragon.” This road has 318 curves in just 11 miles. That is one curvy highway! My uncle tells me that people ship their motorcycles there from all over the world, just to ride this stretch of highway. And John calls us, through the ancient words of Isaiah, to make straight the highway. This is the image that comes to me: 318 curves in 11 miles. Imagine trying to straighten out such a highway, with all of those hairpin turns!

Straightening out our own lives might be a bigger task, though. I can see my own life in those hairpin turns. I make a decision to do well in a particular area of my life and I proceed in that direction for a little while, and then like one of those hairpin turns, I find myself proceeding in exactly the opposite direction – away from the good that I had decided to do. I imagine we are all like that, to some extent. Paul wrote in Romans 7, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Can you relate to that? I certainly can. Maybe preparing the way of the Lord, making his paths straight, has something to do with this struggle that is in all of us to do, more and more, what it is that God wants us to do. Maybe making the paths straight is taking out some of those hairpin turns in our lives. I’ve got to say, though, that those hairpin turns aren’t all bad. For when we are heading in the wrong direction, those hairpin turns are a turn back in the right direction. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That word, repentance, is one of those “church words” that we really don’t like to talk about. I picture a much more charismatic preacher shouting “REPENT” as he waves a thick King James Bible at the congregation. But repentance is the way back to God. C.S. Lewis, in his classic book *Mere Christianity*, writes “repentance...is not something God demands of you before he will take you back and which he could let you off if he chose: it is simply a description of what going back to him is like.” Going back to God, preparing the paths of the Lord – this is what we need to do in this season of Advent. Repentance is what we all need. The word repent is a translation of the Greek word metanoia, which really isn’t a religious word. It’s a common Greek word which means “to turn, to change, to reverse oneself.” It is a word that is used by Greek drill sergeants today. It really means something pretty close to “about face.” Repentance isn’t just confessing our sins. It isn’t just receiving forgiveness. It is *turning around*. It is changing direction, turning our backs on the sins of the past, and turning our faces to our God. It is charting a new

course in life. When we repent, we turn away from the old life that we were leading, and turn instead toward Jesus and the new life that we can instead live, through God's grace. Repentance is a big part of this time of waiting, of preparing. This is a time to examine our lives, to see what we need to turn away from. It isn't supposed to *just* be a time of decorating our houses and buying presents. It certainly isn't supposed to be a time of fighting in a store over the last of whatever the "must-have" gift of the year is. It is a time of reflection on the darkness that exists in our lives, so that we will be ready for the light of Christ. It is a time of examining the empty places in ourselves, so that we will be ready for Christ to fill us up. This time of repentance is like one of those hairpin turns. We must straighten the highway, but we must straighten it going in the right direction. If we straighten it out going in the wrong direction, that certainly won't prepare the way of the Lord.

A pastor named Warren Casiday told a story about meeting God on the highway. He said that he and his wife were traveling north on the interstate when they saw a semi-truck crest the hill ahead of them, heading south. Above the cab, across the front of the trailer in huge print were the letters G – O – D. Casiday says he started wondering about God's trucking business – what kind of music is played in God's trucks, does God's truck ever break the speed limit, and if it does, would the state trooper give God a ticket? As Casiday and his wife's vehicle came closer, he could see that the side of the trailer again had the letters G – O – D in large print and then the words "Guaranteed Overnight Delivery." When the truck met them and continued on in the opposite direction, one more question flashed in Casiday's mind: "If God is going south, what am I doing going north?"

John's message of repentance calls us to turn around and go in the direction God is going. And we can't do that if we are focused only on the holiday and ignoring the Holy Day. Sure, some presents have to be bought and some parties must be thrown or attended, but those should be reflections of the joy of the season, not the focus of the season. The focus should be the Holy Day, the day on which our God put on human flesh to teach us how to live and to save us from our sins. And we should not allow all of those activities to be causes of stress in our lives, which will only pull our attention away from where the focus should be, on celebrating the incarnation of our Lord. This time of year we are given the opportunity to take a few moments to reorder our lives, to turn around and head in God's direction, to prepare the way of the Lord. All of us – from the emperor to the one wandering in the wilderness – are part of God's story. Each of us is called to play a similar role to that which John played – to be the forerunner of Christ, to introduce Christ to the world. The first step is to align ourselves with God's plan by repenting – turning to go in God's direction, so that we may be prepared to welcome the coming King.

Advent – the season of waiting – may not be the most popular season of year. The stores have been pushing Christmas on us for a many weeks now. My family received our first Christmas card days ago. Christmas is all around us, and yet here we are in the church saying "it's not time yet." The word "advent" means "a *coming* into place, view or being." Advent is a process. It is not instantaneous. Advent takes time, and we've still got some time before Christmas. Let's embrace this time and use it well. Let us use this season of advent to turn to travel in God's direction as we make straight the pathways of our coming King. Amen