

# “Prepare the Way of the Lord”

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## Philippians 1:3-11

*I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

## Luke 3:1-6

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,*

*make his paths straight.*

*Every valley shall be filled,*

*and every mountain and hill shall be made low,*

*and the crooked shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth;*

*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and thoughts and images that we have within. I pray that you would take the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read in scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. We pray that you would take all of these and transform them by the power of your spirit into the word of Christ and that that word would live within us, would guide and nurture us, would be in our hearts, upon our lips, and in our hands as we live our lives in this world that is broken and in need of your love and grace. May we be agents of peace and wholeness in all that we say and all that we do. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

So I'm not quite sure if what I'm about to offer is a Bible study or a sermon. I think after preaching it twice, that it's a little bit of both because what I've done is I've looked at this text that comes from Isaiah, the 40th chapter, that's brought and put into the mouth of John in the Gospel of Luke and tried to consider what this ancient word that's been recycled in the Gospels might mean for us if we once again grab hold of it, or better yet, let it grab ahold of us. And so I've looked at the passage and I've kind of laid it out and I'm going to walk through it. But I'm going to walk through it not in the order in which it's given, but in an order that I think makes sense and I'm going to do that either because it makes more sense or because I think in circles and not in outlines and I'm never quite sure where to start. That could be it. But I'm going to start today with the part of the passage that says, "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord" and I'm going to lift up for us this idea that we are at work trying to prepare the way of the Lord and that the invitation is for us to do that in the wilderness, or the desert as is this meaning of the same word, or for us, in the desolate places of our life. What it means for

us is that we need to sometimes get out of our rhythm and get out of what's normal in order for us to have perspective and to examine what's going on within us and around us. Now I don't know about you, but I love going out about an hour and a half from here and finding a stream and getting in the water and fishing or just being there among the trees and the birds and the quiet that is the country. In a sense, this passage is talking about the joy or the benefit of being in that kind of a place, rather than being at Kaldi's downtown on the Courtyard in Kirkwood. It's telling us that when we get to those places that are uncivilized or out of the ordinary, we have a better appreciation for what God is doing in our lives and in the lives of others. An example of this is that when I'm in the desert, far away in northern New Mexico, and I think about all the things that are going on here in Kirkwood, whether it be a situation in my family, or something that's going on in the church, or even in the larger community.

There's just an ability to appreciate the goodness of those things a little bit more than when I'm here doing sermon prep or having a meeting. It's hard to see goodness when we're in our regular rhythm. And so this passage is inviting us to sometimes step back and to see things from a different perspective. And while I was working on this, the idea that came to me was two complimentary images. The first was of the Magi coming to bring their gifts to the Christ child. These three wise people, who traversed the wilderness or the desert, the barrenness, in order to offer their gifts. And while I was thinking about them coming to the manger, and kneeling down, and opening up the boxes, and sharing what they brought, superimposed upon that was the image of what Advent might be like for us today, which is that God wants to kneel at our feet and share God's gifts of Christ with each of us. And I know that's a weird thing to think about, that God would want to kneel at our feet and offer us a gift, but I'm playing with the whole notion of Advent, and Christmas, and Epiphany, and just imagining what is it that God wants to do in our lives if we go to that place of deeper perspective and if we're able to open ourselves and to receive that gift.

The second part of the story for me in this passage has to do with the idea of baptism of repentance. It's where the idea came for the children's sermon about taking something and pulling it inside out. Because I understand baptism of repentance not as washing ourselves from the dirt of sin, but really doing what the words really intend, which is that John went out to prepare the people to be able to see things in a different way. Repentance means we change our mind, or our understanding, or our view, and what John was doing in getting ready for Jesus is he's trying to get people to realize God is not far away, or in smoke and fire anymore, or in the Tabernacle that's protected in the temple. God is at work in our lives, and on our earth, and in us. And this is a different way of thinking. And in order for us to do that, sometimes we need to turn ourselves inside out. We need to examine what it is that's going on inside of us.

So the image that came for this, and I know it's a hard one to get our heads around, and it might gross some of you out, but I had this idea of a big egg. And that the invitation for us is to sort of reach in, and grab the gooey parts, and to pull it out through the shell, and to have everything change so that the shell is in the middle, it's still whole, but all the goo is around the shell. All the stuff that is life and messy is around, and available, and we can see it. Think about how much time you spend in your life trying to look good or to be an adult. How much time you spend ignoring those around you because they might cause you harm or get in your way or slow you down. The idea of this repentance of baptism is that we need to maybe turn our way of thinking in a way of being inside out. An example of this I saw on the internet was of two young toddlers who were at the airport. These two families had never met-- they didn't know each other at all. They were just simply getting ready to get on a plane and fly to a common destination. Each of them had toddlers that had just begun to walk and these two children saw each other one at one end of the gate area, one at the other end and they just started to walk towards each other kind of wobbly. And when they got together, they just embraced and totally hugged each other. That's what it means to live inside out. Because as adults we don't live that way anymore. We carry those deep things inside of us, those personal things, those loving things underneath our sense of dignity and propriety.

When was the last time you went up to a stranger and gave them a hug? We don't do that, right? Well, we don't do a lot of things. We don't share our hurts. We don't share our joys. We're not honest with those around us because we work too hard at protecting ourselves. And I believe this passage is about living a life unprotected and trying to live differently so that we can authentically relate to each other and be genuinely supportive of one another. The third movement in the passage is that every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill lowered, every crooked spot made straight, every rough spot made smooth. I took that to mean that we have work to do in order to prepare ourselves for the present that God desires to give each of us. We get to participate in this work of [advent in?] Christmas and beyond. We have our part to do in what God wants-- in how God wants to bring Christ into the world. And all this language about filling in the valleys and lowering the mountains is that we need to examine what in our lives are obstacles, obstacles to us that sort of hold us

in like again the shell that keep the love and joy and light of Christ in us rather than being shared among us. Again, this is why I love the fact that we light candles in this season because it reminds us to let that light show among our neighbors, our friends and even our strangers who are among us. After preaching the sermon at the 905 service, I had a congregant come forward and share a story with me that so beautifully illustrates this part. She said that she's in New York City and it gave a presentation. The presentation went perfectly and she got out of the building and was just filled with so much joy she couldn't help but smile. She said as she walking down the street, she was just smiling at all these strangers in New York City. I just want that to sink in for a minute [laughter]. She said a monk dressed in orange came up to her beaming from ear to ear, and held her hand and began talking to her in Tibetan, she thinks. She didn't understand a word he said, and he didn't understand a word that she said. But she was smiling and he was smiling, and as they were holding hands, he slid a little bracelet on her wrist. Prayer beads. And the fact that that experience happened, that she could come back here still wearing that bracelet, and share that story, is exactly what I am talking about. When we open ourselves and share the light, we have no idea what blessing might come our way, or how it might be used or enjoyed. But I love that story. Remove the obstacles. Remove those things that get in the way of you being who you really are. And just see what the world offers you.

The last part of the passage is the part in Luke that doesn't exactly quote Isaiah word for word. In Luke, it says, "All flesh," or people, "shall see the salvation of God." I've been fixated for a couple of weeks or maybe longer on the idea that salvation, while it could mean being lifted up and protected, also means wholeness; that what God wants to do in my life and in yours, and in our community, and in our world, is he wants wholeness to be present. God wants us to get together and to get along with each other; to stop the bickering and the fighting and the name-calling and the pettiness. She wants us to love each other, to genuinely care about each other. She wants us to listen when we ask, "How are you doing?" Rather than saying, "Fine, how are you," God wants us to linger for just a moment, and be open to whatever that person in front of us offers to us. Because when we act in that way, when we ask, not out of habit but out of a genuine presence and joy at being together, if anybody sees us interact with each other, they will see the goodness of God among us. And isn't that the greatest gift we could give in this world today? That when people look at us, they see God's goodness.

Everything in our world tells us, "Do not live this way. Live for yourself. Live protected. The world is out to get you or hurt you or cause you harm. Don't care about your neighbor. Only fend for yourselves." But the Gospel is different. It's asking us to be different, to live differently, to live as if Christ lives within us. And that when we do that together, other people will notice us. And so I close with this awareness, that to live in this way is a choice. We can choose to live from a place of spacious warmth, a place of deep breathing, a place of relaxing presence, a place of attentiveness to our neighbors. I think that when we choose this, what it's called is faith. We can choose to be faithful by choosing to love our neighbors and to welcome the gift that God has for each of us. Let us be faithful in the season ahead. Amen.