

## PREPARING THE WAY

TEXT: Luke 3:1-14

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on December 12, 2021*

At one time or another, we all know what it feels like not to be prepared for something. And it's not a good feeling. In fact, social scientists tell us that one of the most common nightmares is the one where you dream about a big event that you're not prepared for. You're getting married but never got the license. You're taking that big final exam and forgot to study. Once, after I had produced a big play, I dreamed that we were asked to do it all again the next week but we had already dismantled all the props and gotten rid of the costumes.

One of my favorite stories is the preacher who got into the pulpit week after week relying on the Holy Spirit to tell him everything he was to say. Sunday after Sunday he would pray, "Lord, give me your message for this morning. What do you have to say to your servant?" Finally, one Sunday he got up and said again, "Lord, give me your message for this morning. What do you have to say to your servant?" and the Lord finally answered him, "You're not prepared!"

I don't think there's a time of the year when we are more focused on preparations than the Christmas season. We groan under the weight of baking, shopping, writing cards, wrapping, decorating, and all the things that go along with the season. And in the midst of all that hustle and bustle, there is this strange and annoying man in the Gospel, John the Baptist, telling us that there is yet one more preparation to be made. We need to prepare the way of the Lord.

Every year at about this time there is an undercurrent of longing in many of us that maybe this year, like the Grinch, the true meaning of Christmas will come through and we'll feel the true joy of the season. And yet, the things that we constantly prepare for often have little to do with making our hearts ready for such a moment. It's true that planning something doesn't always ensure success. But not planning for something doesn't improve the odds. What I'm saying is: Don't spend every waking minute preparing for the secular side of the holiday and think that will somehow ensure a peak spiritual experience on Christmas.

Thinking cozy thoughts about fresh baked cookies and hot wassail around the brightly lit tree with carols playing in the background does not get the tree up or the cookies baked. In the same way, thinking kindly thoughts about babies in mangers or imagining the Hallelujah Chorus on a starlit hillside is not adequate spiritual preparation for Christmas. Not even if you do it outside with a sheep. Not even if it is Christmas Eve. How do we prepare for the coming of Jesus? What does spiritual preparation for Christmas look like? We have a Bible story for that. Kim just read it.

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. When John was born, an angel prophesied that he would be the one to prepare the way for the Messiah, so our search for what spiritual preparation looks like starts with him. John grew up in the desert wilderness in southern Israel. There is some evidence that he may have been raised by the community at Qumran that gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls. He lived a spartan lifestyle, dressed in skins, ate locust and wild honey, and railed against the corruption of the religious elders, demanding the repentance of the people. While we don't know for sure if he was part of the group, that lifestyle was common to the life of the Essenes, an ascetic branch of Judaism that lived near the Dead Sea and whose practices included ritual immersion in water.

The Greek word baptizo means to dip or sink in water, so John became known as John the Baptist or John the Baptizer because he called people to symbolize their repentance by being immersed in water. That's

the root of our word for baptism, but the practice existed in Judaism and in other religions before it entered Christianity. When we see John baptizing people, he's not making Christians out of them. There are no Christians, as we understand ourselves, in the story. John is using a Jewish ritual practice to encourage his followers to publicly symbolize repentance, allowing others to hold them accountable to their promise. Repentance is the first part of the Christian ritual of baptism as well. Dr. Del Pino talked about repentance last week and I want to go back to that idea for a minute, since the concept is frequently misunderstood.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, and all it means is to change your mind. You thought it was best to do x and now you see it differently and decide to do y instead. To repent means to turn around; to think differently and, as a result, to behave differently. We tend to think of repentance as this awful affair—groveling and admitting that we are horrible wretches who can't manage to do a single thing right. We're often taught that we need to come crawling to God on broken glass, to do ourselves harm, and then maybe...just maybe...God will forgive us.

That has been a perception in some Christian circles for millennia and has done immeasurable damage. Sure, there are times when someone has done some really horrific things, and the realization that they were wrong and that God wanted something different from them can feel devastating. In the hymn *Amazing Grace*, the author, John Newton, refers to himself as a "wretch" in the first verse. Well, he was a slave trader, devoting his life to destroying thousands of innocent lives for money. When he realized how wrong that was, I'm not surprised that he reached for the word "wretch." Probably he had been called worse, and not without cause.

But John Newton's hymn isn't called, "O Wretched Me, How Dare I Live?" It's called "Amazing Grace," because Newton came to realize that all God asks of us is to change our minds, open our eyes, and see that there is more to this life than playing King of the Hill. The act of repentance ends in joy, not humiliation. Merely to switch from harming others to harming ourselves is to remain blind to the path. There is no need to grovel, or think poorly of ourselves.

To repent is simply to acknowledge that we have been headed down a road that hasn't done anyone any good, including ourselves. When we finally stop doing what isn't working and decide to go in a different direction, that decision brings relief, freedom, and, ultimately, joy. And to mark that change, we make a public commitment of being washed in water—we are baptized. It changes lives, not because the baptismal waters are magic, but because a truly changed mind implies a commitment to changed behavior, and uniting with a community that is committed to the same path helps us to stick with the change in our weaker moments.

The story of John the Baptist shows us that this is the key to preparing for the work of Jesus. Repent. Change your mind. Stop living in the self-serving way the world typically lives and take a different road. "What does that look like?" the people ask John, and his answers sound very much like Jesus' own teaching. John tells the people, whoever has two shirts should share with someone who doesn't have a shirt at all. The one who has food should give some of it to the person who has none. To tax collectors, John says, be fair. Don't take more than you should from people. To the soldiers, he says, shun violence, be content with your wages and don't be greedy. Don't make false accusations.

It was the job of John the Baptizer to wake people up—to say, "You're going the wrong way! The way looks good, but it will lead to ruin for us all! Turn back! Don't go that way!" His job was to get people thinking and to give them a roadmap for a better path. Then Jesus could take over to show people how to stay on that road, warning about the pitfalls along the way and the joy for everyone if we can stick together and help each other reach the journey's end.

That's still what it takes to prepare for the coming of Jesus. If you want to have a Christmas that means something beyond exhaustion, it will mean traveling a different road, making some changes. For some that might mean a total U-Turn, as you realize that life on the outside might seem great, but life on the inside just isn't working. Some people come to recognize that they've been living the way others thought they should instead of in a way that feels satisfying and fulfilling. Don't try to outsource your joy and fulfillment. It doesn't work. It comes from the inside out, not the outside in. You might need to change your mind; change the story you tell yourself about who you are; pick a different road.

Some may not need to turn around but simply start paying attention—to move from an aimless stroll to a more intentional walk. If I really believed that life was about more than just me and mine, what might I do differently? Do I ever check in with my highest values? Do I even know what those are? If I asked the people who know me best to tell me what priorities are evident in my life, what would they say? Would they match what I think they are? What does it actually mean to be a spiritual person? Do I believe there is a higher power at work in the world? How do I define God? Is it possible that God acts in and through human beings? What does it mean for Jesus to be born, not just in a stable in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, but in me? Those are the questions that prepare us for Christmas.

We don't have to have all the answers to be prepared; those are the questions of a lifetime. But our spiritual lives don't begin until we start asking them. It starts with the willingness and commitment to explore, to open our hearts and minds to possibilities, to recognize that there might be something that a shepherd sleeping on a hillside might see that we can't in our brightly-lit kitchens; to admit that the keeper of a stable or a pagan astrologer might have a kind of knowledge that was never taught in the ivy halls, and maybe being willing to walk the road together could allow us all to learn from each other. It's in that learning, in that interaction and openness to the possibilities that others might know things we don't that we discover how we can prepare the way not just for ourselves, but for others.

When we can hear that people have a rough time finding faith because of the hypocrisy in the church, we can commit to making that rough way smooth by living as we say we believe. When we learn about the mountains of difficulty that people cannot surmount—poverty, illness, oppression, prejudice—we can find the resolve to lay those mountains low. When we stumble into valleys of depression, loneliness, and fear, and discover we're not alone, love has a chance to lift us all out together. Walk the road; open your heart; prepare the way. Jesus is coming soon. Amen.