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Prepare the Way for the Lord!

Luke 3:1 – 14

Advent. It's marvelous, isn't it? It's a season of pregnant anticipation, counting down the weeks to the *first advent* of Christ at Christmas, and a reminder that we yet await a *second advent*, when Christ will come to make everything right. It's also a season which holds in tension that waiting, longing, and in the meantime receiving smaller advents in-between, though we see through a mirror dimly. Advent is a beautiful, subdued season, with rich blues and purples, the colors of royalty and of repentance. It's a season which *names* the darkness, yet *refuses* to succumb to it, lighting one more candle each week, pronouncing the good news that Isaiah prophesied, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isa 9:2).

In this second week of Advent, we are reminded of one who came before Jesus, one who prepared the way for him. We are reminded of John the Baptist. He is the one Matthew describes in camel's hair with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey (Matt 3:4). He's the one without social graces, who yells at the people who come to hear him, that they are a *brood of vipers*. He's the one who, though he's Jesus' *cousin*, doesn't know that Jesus is the Messiah. John seems so out of touch, like the guy who lives under a rock, in that old Geico commercial. Don't you think?

John has become such a cartoon character, that he's easy to dismiss. He's eccentric and gets killed off just as quickly as he's introduced in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. John prepares the way for the coming Messiah, but he's unsure if Jesus is the Messiah, because he doesn't meet John's expectations.

John is eccentric, and he doesn't quite get it, but Luke doesn't want us to dismiss him. Luke wants us to pay attention, in fact, because John is an important character in the story of Jesus. And he is the character upon whom we will focus this morning.

Luke sets the scene for John by naming the powers that be. Tiberius Caesar is in the fifteenth year of his reign as the emperor of the entire Roman world. Pontius Pilate (who later puts Jesus to death), is the governor of Judea. Herod is the tetrarch of Galilee (who later corroborates with Pilate to put Jesus to death). Herod's brother, Philip, and Lysanias are the other two tetrarchs. Finally, Annas and Caiaphas are high priests at this time. (Caiaphas *also* plays a part in Jesus' passion, handing him over to Pilate.) Luke names *seven leaders* in these two verses. Each has his own particular role and governance, but together, they lead it all – the secular and the religious.

Piercing this dense politico religious landscape, *the word of God comes*. But it doesn't come to these leaders, not even to the religious ones; it comes to John, the miracle son of Zechariah, and it comes in the *wilderness* (Lk 3:2b). God's word is on the move, and it's not to those in power or in the hustle and bustle of city life. God's word comes in the lonely wilderness to John.

The wilderness is a place the people of God know all too well. It's the place of testing and refining, and it's the place no one *chooses* to be. (Remember Israel's journey through the wilderness?) After 40 years of seemingly endless desert, God's people enter the Promised Land by crossing the *Jordan River*.

As Luke sets the scene for John, he not only pits John against the politico religious leaders of the day, he begins his story in the *wilderness*, along the *Jordan River*. Luke is about to share something *big*. The word of God has come to John, and he is reminding God's people of the exodus and of the Promised Land.

Something *big* is happening, and John is preparing them for it. The ho-hum days are *gone*; a *new era* has dawned! And this calls for *dramatic* action! So John doesn't simply call them to confess or to purify their hands; he preaches a "*baptism* of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk 3:3b).

John did something that simply wasn't done! Baptisms were reserved for Jewish proselytes, *not* those who had inherited the faith! And John knew that, but he called for it *anyway*. Because God's people did not pursue the things of God, they needed to confess, to change, and to be forgiven.

Then Luke goes on to write that John is the fulfillment of a prophesy from hundreds of years ago. He is the "voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation'" (Lk 3:4b – 6).

John is not some crazy man who lives under a rock. He is one who has received the word of God and has been given the Spirit to turn hearts and prepare the way for the Lord.

In Advent, we hear the language of preparing the way for the Lord, and we have some notions of what that means. That means getting out our Advent Wreaths and devotionals, coming to worship, trying not to go too crazy with the Christmas shopping and social calendar, trying to be peaceful and quiet and content...and if *nothing* else, trying to remember Christ in Christmas! These Advent and Christmas seasons get to be so overwhelming; we feel fortunate if we remember *Jesus!*

On one of the local Christian radio stations, a repeating blurb said something like, "As Christians, we need to *rise up*, to give hope, to share joy, to be kind," and so on and so on and so on and *so on!* The five second blurb seemed to go on *interminably*. I felt tired *before* listening to the radio, and then I felt completely *overwhelmed* by all of the things that I *should* do and *should* be, as I heard this "positive and encouraging" word on the Christian radio.

If you and I were to count how many times we tell ourselves what we *should* and *shouldn't* do in a day, my guess is that we would be totally *shocked*. And if we recognized how many *decisions* we make based on those "should's," I'm confident that we would be no less shocked. The voice of the "should's," the "have to's," and "need to's" is *not* the voice of the Spirit!

One of my personal cues for when I am *not* being attentive to the voice of the Spirit, is when I realize that I am making decisions because I think that I *should* or *shouldn't* do them. I feel exhausted, weighed down, overwhelmed, and like the joy has been *sucked* out of life. What seemed like the obviously logical, kind, generous, and "Christian" thing to do, is in fact *undiscerning* and rooted in *fear*.

In contrast, there are multiple signifiers when we are discerning. There may be a lightness, a peace, joy, an internal "yes!", a release of pent-up emotions, a lack of the need to control, and an openness to God. Often, there is resonance with a trusted spiritual advisor, friend, or family member.

Now this is not to say that discerning the voice of God will always bring about pleasant outcomes. Take John for example. He was imprisoned and beheaded.

But the word of God was so clear to John, that he was unconcerned about the many powerful forces around him. He knew that he was called to prepare the way for the Lord, so that *all people* would see God's salvation.

John didn't care to be particularly "nice" to the people who came to be baptized by him. He called them a *brood of vipers*, and told them to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Lk 3:8a). John expected that the Messiah would come, and that it would be *dramatic*! Whoever did not have their heart turned toward God and produce good fruit, would be destroyed. "The ax is *already* at the root of the trees," he said (Lk 3:9a).

The crowd, toll collectors, and soldiers are *moved*. They ask John what they should do. So...should I go through the whole "should" thing again? What's interesting is that "should" is not a direct translation of the Greek; it's added in by the English translators. A more accurate translation to their question would be, "What do we do?" Or, "What are we to do?"

To the hurried, there is no difference between the question, "What should we do?" and "What are we to do?" This exercise sounds like splitting hairs. But the truth is, it *does* make a difference, because the motivations are entirely different. "Should" comes from the outside, a place of obligation, the idea being that you and I need to impose on ourselves to be good people or to do the right thing.

In contrast, "What are we to do?" is a question that is *internally* motivated. It's a question unconcerned with trying to look good or to make oneself good. It's the question of a changed heart. It's the question of person captivated and changed by God, so that one cannot *help* but respond; response *bubbles over*.

This is why the popular slogan "Bible: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth," is so problematic. If the Bible is primarily a book of instructions to tell you and me what you and I should and shouldn't do, we might as well give up now! How in the *world* can we do and do not *this* many instructions?

But if the Bible's purpose is instead to show us who *God* is, who *we* are, and what *God's purpose* in the world is, then we're having an entirely *different* conversation. Our focus then is not on all of the things that we should and shouldn't do, but we honestly recognize our natural inclination to sin and our need for God to save us. As 1 John 1:8 – 9 says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." And God's motivation to save, to forgive, is *not motivated* by our good actions. You and I can never do enough to earn or to motivate God to save us. But out of God's great love for the world, "He gave His one and only Son, [Jesus], that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

Our good works are then not only in *response* to the love of God in Christ for you and me; our good works are the *result* of God's Holy Spirit *alive* and *at work* in us! We don't need to try to force ourselves to be good people; the Holy Spirit is at work in us to accomplish God's purposes! As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, "It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us free." "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will *not* gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is *contrary* to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is *contrary* to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." So how do we know that the Spirit is at work in us?

We will see the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentles and self-control” (Gal 5:1, 16 – 18).

As we prepare the way for the Lord this Advent season, may we do so with an open heart to the Spirit of God, alive and active in and among us! And the people walking in darkness will see a marvelous light! Glory to God in the highest! Amen