

Preparing the Way for Christmas – 3. The Fruit of Repentance

Luke 1:80, 3:1, 3:3-4, 3:7-8, 3:10-14

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A few weeks ago, I was looking for a specific book among my shelves. Now, I am an avid reader and am a clergy couple — so when I tell you we have a *lot* of books, you can trust me that we have books scattered among shelves in both of our offices and many rooms of our house. But I *knew* what this book looked like, so I searched confidently. For several days I looked, scanning and rescanning the shelves. This book was no where to be found.

Stubbornly, I tried *once more*, to find this book. This time, I went book by book among my shelves. And wouldn't you know it — there it was, sitting plainly on a shelf I had looked at several times before. I was delighted, and quickly realized my error. The book didn't look like I expected it to. I thought it was a tall, slim hardcover book. Instead, it was short, stout and paperback.

So in all my searching, I was looking for the wrong thing and missed what was right in front of me. This is sort of a silly example, but we've all been there - haven't we? Searching for something right in front of us. Misguided in our search because our expectations weren't quite right.

A couple weeks ago, as we began Advent, I shared with you the story of Zechariah. That he was a priest who was among those waiting for God's Messiah to come. He, like many others, were reading scripture closely and watching for God's arrival. Expecting it to come, looking like the great leaders of their time: a strong, royal warrior who was of 'appropriate' age and lineage, with all the right qualifications for the role of Messiah.

They imagined God sending a great King among them, who would be announced with royal fanfare. Perhaps winning a great battle. Or being declared boldly by a servant of the king with a loud, golden trumpet. They expected greatness. What else would God do? For centuries the people waiting for the promised Messiah to be among them, and to bring God's mercy, justice, and peace to them. But then one day, an angel declared to Zechariah that he and his wife, surprisingly, would become parents to the one who would prepare the world for the Messiah. With equally surprise, an angel appeared to Mary, too, a young, humble girl of no social standing, and declared that she would be the Mother of God.

A central theme to the Gospel is that God is continually surprising us by how and when God appears. Because the Messiah was not to be a warrior king, but a small and vulnerable infant. And the one who heralded his arrival and prepared the way, was not a member of court. But was a wandering preacher with clothes of camel's hair, who ate locusts and wild honey.

The Gospel's tell us about John's birth, but then they fast forward through his childhood and young adulthood, where Luke's Gospel tells us, "he grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry" (1:80). This is the entirety of what we know of John from birth until he's beginning his ministry at 30.

Meanwhile, his parents - Zechariah and Elizabeth are no where to be found beyond their stories leading to John's birth. We know they were old, and so perhaps, they died early in John's life. But likely, as parents who took seriously their role to raise John into a life of ministry, they dedicated John and had him live in a religious community that would raise and train him for God's work.

John the Baptist is known to be part of a group of Jewish community called the "Essenes". They were known to take in and raise young men, training them in the faith. And they understood themselves to be people to help ready and prepare people for the way of the Lord. This seems a fitting place for young

John to study, both because of what we know from the angel about who he is to be, and because of what we hear from him once his ministry begins.

The Essenes lived simply, and plainly. They often withdrew from the world and set themselves apart, relishing the quiet places to be with God and to study. And they lived with radical devotion, readily preparing for God to be among us. *This is the same community, by the way, that is believed to have produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were ancient manuscripts discovered in the 1940s, hidden in cliffs and protected from Roman armies.*

But this is the understood way we imagine John the Baptist being raised. First by parents who were faithful to God and loved John deeply. And then, by a religious community who taught him more about preparing his heart and world for the coming Messiah.

Now, today, we've heard the story of John's entrance into ministry. I suspect if any of us were looking for the one that would declare to us the presence of Jesus, that this person - John - with unruly hair, in unusual dress, carrying insects for his meal - would be least among our expectations.

Even so, John arrives on the scene, quoting the prophet Isaiah in his messages, declaring, "The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight!"

These words, which surrounded him in birth, and grounded him throughout his life, are now the central words for John's public ministry. He has been called, by God, to lead others to prepare and recognize God among them.

I sense John cared deeply, not only about this message, but about the people he was sent to deliver these words too. Because he left the solitude of his home in the wilderness, he left that safe religious community, and went into the world. Matthew's gospel tells us he spoke to people from Jerusalem and all of Judea.

By his actions, we can see how important it was for John to share the message of God with others. Not to hold it tightly, as a secret, known only to those within his community. But instead to declare it, broadly and boldly, to any one who might listen. Like we will see in the ministry of Jesus himself, John seems to hold an inclusive and broad view of God's grace, and desires for people from many places and situations in life to know this story.

It would have been common then, for people to hear different preachers and prophets declaring God's word — but John's message was unique. Because while many others would ring warning bells and alarms, declaring only that God's judgment was near... John had another message, one of invitation to live a changed and transformed life.

You can hear John's passion, as we read from Matthew's gospel: "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" (v2).

Change your hearts — this word in Greek meant not only to 'repent' but also to "think differently" and "change your mind". And so, we understand that John is inviting people not only to apologize for their wrong doing, but to be fully changed.

Can you imagine, if the only words you heard about the sin or mistakes in your life were words of judgement or punishment? And maybe some of you have *had* this experience, and you can feel the weight of those words in your belly. But now imagine hearing John, who offered not only judgement, but an invitation for a newly changed life.

Now, of course there are consequences for actions in our lives. But a key difference here: is that John is inviting people to take a step *beyond* the consequence and experience and transformed life. A chance to start a new. A clean slate. An opportunity to not be defined only by past mistakes, but to start fresh and change the course of your life.

We'll hear this message in Jesus, too, like when in John's Gospel, he meets a woman accused of adultery. The crowd around her wants to stone her, but Jesus intervenes, saying, "whoever among you has not sinned shall throw the first stone." And of course, none of the people gathered could claim such a perfect life. So then, to the woman, Jesus says, "go, and sin no more."

To this woman, and to countless others, Jesus offered an opportunity to experience a changed and transformed life. Jesus was not interested in punishing her or casting judgement. Instead, Jesus desired to see her heart and life changed, so that she - and others - could know fully the love of God in their lives.

When I was in seminary, I spent a J-Term in LA, learning about ministry in a couple unique settings. I lived, for those weeks, with a family from El Salvador who were recent immigrants, not all documented, and who lived in a small home. The parents and four children slept in one bedroom, and their house had no heat. Which typically isn't a problem in LA, but that year temperatures dipped into the low 40's and it was very cold at night.

But they were joyful and hopeful, as they shared with me their dreams of a new life here in America, where they could be safe and together. I loved living with them, learning about their life, their family and cooking. They told me how the neighborhood church they had attended had been such a safe haven for them.

This congregation welcomed them as family: helping them figure out school for the kids, English lessons for the adults, and all the challenging things about navigating life in a new country. They said, this congregation *transformed* their lives by the love and presence they shared.

That same month, I also spent time with Homeboy Industries, which is an organization in LA that was started by Father Boyle as a place where formerly gang involved and previously incarcerated people could receive job training and employment. Each year, more than 10,000 people come through their doors, and find a place where their transformed lives can be nurtured and encouraged. A place where they are met with compassion and kindness, rather than judgement.

Michael is one person who found a new beginning there. Reflecting on his experience he said: "[I'm inspired] to motivate other people and kids who are going through what I've been through. It think some people wait till its too late to change. I'm so thankful Homeboy saw something in me that I didn't see in myself... I didn't believe a place like this existed."

In John's Gospel, we're reminded: "*God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him*" (3:17). This is exactly what I heard in the stories of folks I met during my time in LA. Story after story of people who found, in Christ, new life.

And it precisely what John the Baptist has focused his entire life and ministry around. *Be transformed, be changed! Get ready, God is coming!*

John the Baptist's words aren't only for those first hearers so long ago, they are an invitation for you, too. What area in your life is needing a change? What things might you repent of? Is there a heaviness in your heart, or in your gut, because you know you hurt someone you love? Or because, maybe, you've been filled with greed or envy?

All of us have something to confess, an area in our life where we can ask God for forgiveness. But so, too, do all of us have the opportunity to experience God's forgiveness and have changed hearts. In Matthew's Gospel, John directs some of his message specifically to the Pharisees and Sadducees, which are both religious groups. He is bold, crass even, in his language, calling them "children of snakes" as he encourages them to change, too. Even the religious elite (or perhaps, *especially* the religious elite) are called to repent and prepare their hearts, too.

No one is beyond the scope of needing to repent,
and no one is beyond the reach of God's forgiveness.

As we celebrate soon, that God took-on-flesh to live among us, one of the greatest lessons and gifts Jesus offers us is that YOU are loved and lovable. You are forgiven. And you can be transformed. You are not defined by any mistake in your past, but are defined by God's love of you, and how you love one another.

Because of Jesus, we can know full and lasting forgiveness, where our whole lives are transformed by God's grace. And because of this gift, so too can the whole world be changed by God's love.

While John tells us to "*prepare the way of the Lord,*" we do not need to wait to begin readying our hearts and world. We can do so today, offering ourselves to God: quietly confessing our brokenness and earnestly seeking God's healing among us, upon us, and within us.

And when you do, John tells us what we will see. He says, that we will "*produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives*" (3:8).

God is, and will be, at work in your life. And when you allow God to change your life, change your heart, it will produce fruit.

Jesus famously tells us the most important commandment is to: "*love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself*" (22:37).

These commandments are intertwined because we love God *by* loving our neighbor. When we care for the sick, comfort the lonely, feed the hungry, and befriend the stranger — we are showing the fruit of our faith, and preparing the way for God to transform another heart and mind.

John spent his entire life and ministry inviting people to be changed in their hearts, to repent, and to be transformed. To know Jesus and to be *changed* by the presence of Christ in their lives.

This is the work and life that we are all called to as well. You, too, are messengers of God's love to the world, signs of God's grace among us.

And so, in this final week of advent: how might your heart be changed? How might your life be transformed? How might you prepare your heart and world for Jesus?

In these final days of Christmas, I pray the message of Jesus, as we learn through John the Baptist, rings clearly in your heart. I pray you can know and trust, that God desires your hearts and lives be marked and transformed by Christ. And that through you, the whole world might hear a message of hope: prepare the way of the Lord, for Christ is coming near.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, soon to be among us once more, as our long expected Jesus. As we prepare our hearts and world for the birth of the Christ child, set your Spirit upon us now. Free us from our fears and sin, guide us to find our home in you. Make us to see how your love has come to find us, your hope has made its home with us. Fully transform our hearts, and make us a people who wholly transform your world. In the name of your child, we pray: Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 17, 2023

Weekly Prayer

O come, O Wisdom from on high, who ordered all things mightily; to us the path of knowledge show and teach us in its ways to go. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel. Amen.

Monday, December 18

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, comfort my people!

says your God.

Speak compassionately to Jerusalem,

and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended,

that her penalty has been paid,

that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins!

A voice is crying out:

"Clear the LORD's way in the desert!

Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!

Every valley will be raised up,

and every mountain and hill will be flattened.

Uneven ground will become level,

and rough terrain a valley plain.

The LORD's glory will appear,

and all humanity will see it together;

the LORD's mouth has commanded it."

Observation

This passage is traditionally read during Advent and has inspired carols and choir anthems. It calls for God's people to be given comfort, and a promise that God will be among us, "the Lord's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together" (v5).

Application

This passage is connected to Advent because it speaks of the promised Messiah to be among us. It draws an image for us of our world, where God *turns it upside down*, where "every valley will be raised up, every mountain will be flattened" (v4). This reminds me that not only have God's people been seeking comfort and guidance from God for thousands of years, but that since creation, God has been *providing* that comfort and guidance to us. God promises to be present and care for us, and invites us to be part of caring for God's beloved world.

Prayer

Good and loving God, thank you for your faithfulness to me throughout time. Call to me again today, as always -- calling me yours, offering me comfort, and inviting me to follow you always. Amen.

PS. Here is one song based on Isaiah 40 that I particularly enjoy, setting the soundtrack for today's devotional: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJXPeB0EMtU>

Tuesday, December 19

Scripture: Mark 1:4-8

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Observation

John the Baptist, or *baptizer*, was known for being a preacher who called for confession and changed lives. No doubt, he has inspired many a street preacher over the years! Scripture tells us that the people responded to John's messages and found themselves experiencing transformed lives and hearts.

Application

Do you remember your baptism? I suspect many of you were baptized as infants and do not have a vivid memory of it. Some of you likely were older and are fortunate to have memories of this sacrament! One reason we, as Methodists, baptize as infants is as a reminder that baptism is an act of God's grace. God is the one who redeems, restores, and transforms us. It doesn't matter if you are an infant, a teen, or middle-aged, God is the one who acts upon you: saving and transforming your life. But as John the Baptist called to us, we are invited to respond to God's grace by living as ones transformed and freed. What difference does God's love and grace make in your life?

Prayer

Holy God, thank you for being at work in John's life, and in my own. Remind me today of my own belovedness, as one who has been loved and redeemed by you. Help me to love others as freely. Amen.

Wednesday, December 20

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-6

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."*

John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

Observation

John the Baptist's messages centered around two primary themes: confession and discipleship. Confession, which is the 'setting oneself right' with God by naming and asking forgiveness of sins. Then, committing to following God fully, with your heart, soul, and mind.

Application

Have you considered the way that your own confession supports your walk with God? Is confession, and seeking forgiveness, a regular part of your prayer life? Or relationships with others? If so, what kind of impact has this made on your heart and practices? And if not, what might it look like to spend intentional time seeking and making amends?

Prayer

Thank you God, for offering complete forgiveness of my sins. Give me courage to be vulnerable before you, in seeking forgiveness, and help me to live a transformed life. Amen.

Thursday, December 21

Scripture: Matthew 3:7-12

Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”

Observation

Building upon yesterday, the third theme of John’s messages is to point others to Christ, *preparing the way of the Lord*. By encouraging confession and discipleship, John then invites others to watch and wait for Jesus to be among them. “The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (v11).

Application

Have there been people in your life who have helped you to prepare for and follow Jesus? How did their words, actions, or encouragement draw you closer to God? What practices do you keep today, that help you “prepare the way of the Lord”?

Prayer

Holy God, you have promised us a Messiah to bring us forgiveness, life, and salvation. Thank you for the gift of Jesus. Help me to “keep watch” for the ways Christ is at work in my life today, and in times to come. And continue to invite and encourage me to follow you. Amen.

Friday, December 22

Scripture: Luke 3:1-14

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

*“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.*

*Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.
The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.
All humanity will see God's salvation."*

Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire." The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect." Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?" He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay."

Observation

The story of John the Baptist is told in several Gospels. Like Mark and Matthew, Luke's Gospel tells us that John baptizes people and calls them to be transformed. But Luke also grounds John's message in a historical context that invites us to consider how we follow Jesus, not only generally, but also specifically in our own unique time and place.

Application

If you wrote the story of Jesus being present today, and to you, how would your unique setting influence the story you share? How is God uniquely present to you in 2023, through the real, day to day, realities of our lives?

Prayer

God of all time and space, thank you for your continued presence today. Help me to remember that the story of your Son is one that not only happened years ago in Bethlehem, but that continues to transform and save me, today. Guide me to share the story of your Good News with those around me. Make me proclaim, like John the Baptist, that the Lord is near. Amen.

Saturday, December 23

Scripture: Luke 3:15-18

The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. John replied to them all, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.

Observation

The people were "filled with expectation" (v15). Some wondered if John might be the promised Messiah. Others wondered who this person was that John prepared them for. And some were critical of John's message. John "appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people" (vs 18).

Application

We, too, are a people filled with expectation. As we prepare for Christmas, we await the celebrations and wonder of Christ among us. *(And I hope you'll join us for one of our services online or in person tomorrow!)* The birth of Christ is God's gift of peace, love, joy, and peace among us -- for you, and for

all people. In these final hours before celebrating Jesus' birth, how might you share the gift of Jesus with others?

Prayer

Holy Christ, you are the greatest gift. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for calling me to be transformed, and to be generous in my love, fervent in my hope, and faithful in my following of you. Help me to embody your gifts of this season, that I might share your love with others. Amen.