

## PREPARE THE WAY©

**Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6      December 9, 2012      Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

### Advent 2

If someone in a high, powerful position is coming to your region, unless you are trying to make a point about how badly your area needs government funds – most communities will “put on the ritz,” so to speak. They will spruce up the town, they will repair the roads, they will make the way look nice and the travel pleasant. They want to make a good impression!

I remember, in the town we moved from, that the main road coming in from the highway had some old, condemned houses along the street. The town was going to be visited by the governor of Kansas and at a town meeting there was much discussion about how bad an impression those old houses made and why was it that the city put time and money into demolishing some other houses that were not in direct view of those entering the town, yet they never seemed to bother with those on the main road.

It was this way back in the day when John entered the scene in the wilderness. People were used to “preparing the way” when the king was going to be paying a visit. The roads would get some attention so the travel would be smoother and the king would be pleased.

Perhaps some might have heard John’s wilderness cry in that way – at least at first. At least they would be familiar with what it meant to “prepare the way.” Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low.

I like Peterson’s translation in The Message of this quote from Isaiah:

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.

It’s not as poetic as the other translation but it makes clear what the passage means. It means, in a nutshell ... **FIX THE ROADS!!!!**

**PREPARE THE WAY!**

Luke – the historian - gives us an account of what time it was. He tells us that it was the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the second Roman emperor – Tiberius Caesar, which placed the time about 28 or 29 AD. Tiberius was the successor to Caesar Augustus – you know, he was the one who made the decree that all the Jews were to travel to their hometown for the census

– which is why Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem where Jesus ended up being born.

Luke sets the historical stage for us to help us see that John hears his call as a prophet against a whole, powerful Roman empire. He tells us it was when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trach'on-i'-tis; Lysan-i'-as, ruler of Abilene; during the Chief-Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Seven powerful rulers and authorities!

Why so many rulers, anyway? Before King Herod the Great died, he divided his kingdom between 3 of his sons – Herod Antipas in Galilee, Philip was left Iturea and Trachonitis. His son Archelaus was ruler over Judea, Samaria and Edom, but he was so bad that the Jews actually petitioned Rome for his removal.

And that is how Pontius Pilate became the governor of that region and how the Romans came to directly rule Judea.

The kingdom was actually divided into 4 regions and we are told that Lysanias was ruler of the 4<sup>th</sup> region – Abilene. There isn't a lot known about Lysanias but it is believed that there were a number of successors who were in charge of that region that were given that title or name.

So that was the political situation of the time when John enters the picture. And Luke tells us that in the religious realm – it was when Annas and Caiaphas were the High Chief Priests. Annas was actually not the chief priest any longer. Caiaphas was his son-in-law and his successor. But people still viewed Annas as the real Chief priest, as long as he was alive – and he was the power behind Caiaphas, which is why, when we read about Jesus' trial, he goes before both of them.

So there is your history lesson! There will be a test one week from today. Not really.

The point of telling all this is to get the panoramic picture of the powerful kingdom that existed at the time when John the Baptist hears the word of the Lord.

In the middle of this political powerhouse called Rome – that even influenced the way the religious authorities (the High Chief Priests) acted and used their power – comes a nobody – a strange little man who, we are told in Mark, wore camel hair and ate locusts and wild honey. He was poor; he was not important. He was Jesus' cousin, son of the old priest Zachariah and his wife, Elizabeth.

And he is in the wilderness, we are told, when he hears this word – this call – from God. It was a calling that was prophesied from old – that he himself would be the new prophet – the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

This wilderness was not so much just a desert place as it was the spiritual place of old where God wooed his people so they could be brought back to God; reshaped into the people God intended them to be.

There are seven named here, in Luke, who are VIP'S in John's world. It is one against seven. John, the nobody, standing against seven powerful rulers.

Correction – there is actually John, *plus* the word of the Lord, standing against the powerful rulers of the day. The word comes, not in the big cities where life is busy and noisy, but in the wilderness place where you can hear yourself think and maybe – just maybe – you might even hear God speak to you.

But who dares to go there? Because if it is so quiet you hear yourself think – and if you are called to repentance – you just might have to think about what you need to repent of. And that is sometimes hard to do.

It is so much easier to just go along the flow of life, not thinking or reflecting, not facing any of the mistakes, any of the sins of the past or the present. But that is the reason for the wilderness. It is often where God meets us most – in the wilderness of our lives – wherever that may be.

Sometimes it is a lonely place or a place of fear and worry or a place of deep grief and lamenting. God tends to speak to us in that wilderness place at the time when we are most vulnerable – are maybe most pliable, most ready for the refiners fire to burn away the things we don't need or want in our lives and to shape us into the beautiful piece we are meant to be ... clean and pure again.

And so, we might take a look at the contemporary version of this passage in Luke. It might go something like this:

In the 4<sup>th</sup> year when Barak Obama was President and Joe Biden was Vice Present of the United States of America, and Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State, and John Boehner was speaker of the house, and Harry Reid was the majority leader for Congress. When Rick Snyder was governor of Michigan and Jason Hughes was the village president of Holly ...

In that year of 2012, in the midst of political arguments and economic unrest, and heated, bitter disagreements on ethical and social issues ...

In the busy world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with so much technology and science, and powers that be, telling us what to do, what to believe, how to vote, keeping us worried about taxes being raised, worrying about interest rates, college tuition, Obamacare, medicare and social security ...

The Word of the Lord came to a small, insignificant preacher in a Presbyterian Church in the village of Holly ...

And armed with nothing more, she dares to stand before the congregation with the age old Word of the Lord on the second Sunday of Advent, saying "Prepare."

And, just as John the Baptist stayed close to the Jordan – the waters for the baptism of all who would repent and be saved – she stays close to the font – the waters of baptism in the sanctuary – to remind the people that they too have been saved.

The word "repentance" literally means "reversal." Preparing the way for this King God sent us, this salvation giver, this forgiver of sins, means to reverse, to turn back – turn to God with all our hearts, make a change, open ourselves up to God's work in us.

It means that we are to prepare our hearts, our minds, our lives for his coming. Smooth out the rough places, fill up the potholes of your hearts, remember your baptism – the profession of faith you made, and even more important, the grace and spirit given you.

Oh, we are preparing for the joy of Christmas! The celebration of the birth of the one who did come, the one whose name has lasted way, way longer than any of those mighty powers in John or Jesus' day. Jesus is the name that has gone down through the years – those others are mere footnotes in history. Jesus is the one who conquered death, who in his dying gave forgiveness and life. In other words – it appears the weak has become the strong.

And Jesus is the one we continue to prepare for because he has promised to return. We stand by the waters ready for him. We can be assured in this day of conflict and insecurity that the powers that be, like them or not, will not last forever. They will be history.

The grass withers, the flowers fade. But the Word of the Lord will stand forever. We stand on his Word. We stand right smack dab in the waters of our baptism, trusting in the one who is called Immanuel ... meaning God is with us.

Prepare the way! Christ has come. Christ is here. Christ will come again.

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