

“Prepare the Way of the Lord”

Luke 1:68-79; 3:2-6

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I have to admit, Advent has completely snuck up on me this year. Throughout my life, I've usually had something going on that prepared me for Advent and Christmas. For many years, I participated in choirs, and we began practicing our Christmas music sometimes as early as October. In other years, I made an intentional effort to put up my Christmas decorations and start listening to Christmas music right after Thanksgiving, so I would immediately remind myself that Christmas is coming. The past few years, I've had specific Advent studies that I've led, which helped me focus on the season and be ready for it.

None of these things happened this year. I showed up at church last week, and all of a sudden it was Advent. It took most of the first service before I could really wrap my heart and my mind around the fact that Advent was here. So yes, Advent snuck up on me this year. I wasn't prepared for it. I don't want that to happen with Christmas. That's why I'm so glad we have the season of Advent. It gives me time to prepare for the coming of Christmas – to prepare for the coming of Christ into the world yet again.

In this second week of Advent, the focus is on John the Baptist, whose message was one of preparation. Unlike the other three Gospels, Luke gives us quite a detailed account of the origins of John the Baptist. Luke weaves the story of the birth of John the Baptist into the story of the birth of Jesus. Our Gospel texts this morning include not only the message of John the Baptist during his adult ministry, but also a beautiful song of praise and prayer that John the Baptist's father Zechariah spoke after John was born.

So I'd like to spend just a little bit of time this morning remembering Luke's story of the events preceding John's birth before we get to his message.

John's parents were Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest, and one day he was chosen by lot to go into the Temple of the Lord to burn incense. While he was in there alone, the angel Gabriel came and told him that his wife would bear him a son, to be named John. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth were old, and Elizabeth was barren. So Zechariah asked, “How can I be sure of this, since my wife and I are old?” The angel Gabriel promised that it would come true, but he also said that since Zechariah did not believe him, he would not be able to speak until John was born.

When Zechariah came out of the temple, he wasn't able to speak, and sure enough, Elizabeth became pregnant. During her pregnancy, Elizabeth's relative Mary was visited by Gabriel and told that she would have a baby as well, and that his name would be Jesus. Part of Gabriel's

message to Mary was that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant as well, even in her old age. Mary eventually went to spend time with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and when Mary greeted Elizabeth, the baby leapt in Elizabeth's womb. It's as if John the Baptist somehow knew Jesus was near him, even from within the womb.

The day that John the Baptist was born, Elizabeth's family and friends wanted to name the child Zechariah, after his father, but Elizabeth said, "No, his name is John." They disagreed with her, saying that nobody in her family was named John, so they went to Zechariah and gave him a tablet to write on so he could indicate what name he wanted. He wrote, "His name is John" and immediately he was able to speak, much to the amazement of everyone.

The first thing that he says is what we just read responsively, and has become known as the Benedictus. Zechariah praises God, saying that God has remembered his people, has redeemed them and has sent a savior from the house of David so that the people would be saved from their enemies just as the prophets of old said would happen. God had remembered his covenant so that, having been redeemed, the people might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all of their days. All of these words seem to point to Jesus rather than John. It's as if Zechariah has been given some knowledge of what is going to happen when Jesus comes onto the scene.

Then Zechariah begins to speak about his son John, saying that John would be a prophet of the most high, and that he would go before the Lord to prepare his ways. John's job would be to give the people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. This will be John's mission in life, and Zechariah knows it from day one.

Zechariah concludes his statement by saying that the light is dawning. It will be a light for those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, and a light that will guide our feet into the path of peace. This is what Jesus, the light of the world, will do.

Luke ends the story of John the Baptist's birth here. This is all we hear about John until a couple of chapters later when he's all grown up and delivering the message Zechariah knew he would deliver. And so it is in our next scripture text from Luke's gospel this morning that we hear John the Baptist's message.

John wandered around the area of the Jordan River, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He used the words of the prophet Isaiah when he claimed to be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in and every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight and the rough places smooth." And when that happens, all people shall see God's salvation.

So let's unpack this a little bit. John calls people to prepare the way of the Lord. The original hearers of this message would have immediately understood at least a portion of what he said, because in those days, whenever a King or other leader came to town, they went to great effort to ensure the travelling would be easy and that the roads were in good condition. There was a physical preparation effort made.

When I think about how this might be experienced in our modern-day context, there are two things that come to mind.

The first is that it makes me think of all the preparations that are made whenever the President of the United States or the Vice President goes anywhere. Secret Service officials spend weeks planning for any trip. They work with the airports, local law enforcement, and lots of other groups wherever the President goes. They know the best route to his destination, and they make sure nothing gets in his way. I experienced this a few weeks ago when I was flying down to Nashville for a conference. My airplane had to wait at the gate for twenty minutes because Vice President Biden was flying out of the airport and they needed to have clear airspace. They were preparing his way, that it might smooth and direct.

As we travel our own Advent journey of preparation in these next few weeks, I wonder how we might take our own preparation for the coming of Christ as seriously as the Secret Service take their preparations for our country's leaders. Are we willing to devote that same kind of time and energy? What might we do differently in the coming days and weeks to prepare the way for Christ's coming and make it a smooth and direct pathway? What bumps in the road does Jesus face as he makes his way into our lives? What prevents him from having direct access to our hearts and our lives?

The second modern-day thing that John's message of preparing the way brings to mind is the Henderson Road project we endured this past summer. For years and years, the city made an ongoing effort to tend to that road. The continued pothole maintenance makes me think of John's admonition that every valley should be filled in. The bumps along the way, especially where the side streets connected, made me think of the hills that John said should be made low.

Over and over each year, the city would do what it could to clean up the road, but nothing they did ever made a long-lasting impact. They would tend to the surface of the road, but the problem was the brick road that lay underneath all the asphalt. They needed to dig deep to make the kind of fix that would last. And that deep digging took time and effort.

Maybe that's what some of us need to do this Advent. After years and years of cleaning up the surfaces of our lives during Advent, maybe this is the year to dig deep and address some of the issues that really need to be taken care of in order to have a long-lasting difference. I don't

know what those issues might be for you. Only you and God know that. Maybe this is the year to spend some intentional time working through those issues so that the pathway for Jesus is smooth and direct and long-lasting.

Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Jesus the Christ. The invitation to Christian discipleship from today's Scripture texts is to think about the road Jesus would need to take to enter into our lives anew or more profoundly this Christmas. How might we make that road an easier path for Jesus to take? What roadblocks might be standing in the way, and how might we remove those roadblocks this Advent?

Christmas reminds us that Jesus Christ came into the world as Emmanuel, God with us. Advent gives us the time to prepare for Jesus to come anew into our lives. There are many opportunities offered here at Maple Grove this Advent season to take the time to prepare for Christ's coming. Whether it be through Sunday morning worship, Thursday night Vespers, the many fellowship opportunities, the R&R Retreat or the Advent Prayer Walk, my prayer is that we all might truly prepare the way of our Lord this Advent season, in whatever way is necessary in our own lives.