

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Prepare the way of the Lord!”

- Luke 3:4

The Baptist’s cry is like a siren that violently pierces a calm dark night. *“Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”* Get up! Are you ready?

Something is happening! Something you didn’t expect. Something that requires all your attention. The Lord is coming! Not in some distant far off future, but NOW!

Saint Luke contrasts the urgency and immediacy of the Baptist’s cry with the staid, boring, recitation of who is ruling. *“In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”* In other words, any old boring day in the history of the world. Except what comes next changes everything, *“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah.”* The boring same old same old is shattered in an instant with those words.

Wait! What happened? *“The word of God came...”* It came right into the middle of everyday life, right into the real time of history. And it came to do one thing: *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”* Because where His word goes, the Lord goes. Where His word is the Lord is.

At the heart of Advent lies the word of God on the Baptist’s lips, *“Prepare!”* *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”* And like men and women awoken from a deep

sleep at 2:30 in the morning our first jumbled thought is, “Oh no! What do I need to do?” “Prepare? Prepare? Am I prepared? How do I prepare?” Awoken from our slumber we miss the mystery of those words. We miss that it’s the word itself that prepares the way of the Lord, both in the lives of those who heard the Baptist in person, and in our own lives.

Saint Luke has already introduced his readers and hearers to John the Baptist. His Gospel begins with the annunciation of John’s birth by the Archangel Gabriel to His father Zechariah as he is in the middle of offering incense to the Lord. In our hurry to get to Gabriel’s annunciation of the conception of Jesus to the Blessed Virgin it’s easy to skip over and pay a little less attention to the annunciation of John’s birth. But we shouldn’t because here we already see that the preparation for the coming of the Lord lies in God’s word, not our actions.

God promises Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth a son. A son who will bear *the “spirit and power of Elijah,”* that is, he’ll be a prophet. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth are old. And all these years Elizabeth has been barren. So, in response to the angel’s news Zechariah looks the angel straight in the eye and says, “*How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.*” This is not the Blessed Virgin’s marveling, “*How can this be?*” It’s more, in the line of “Yeah, right! Prove it!” And so Gabriel strikes him mute. He is unable to speak for 9 months. For 9 months he must ponder the mystery of the word of God in forced silence. And this lets us in on part of the mystery. It is not Zechariah and Elizabeth’s actions that bring about John’s birth. Not ultimately. It is God’s word. God’s promise that prepares the way for their actions to be fruitful.

So it is that part of the mystery of the Baptist’s message, “*Prepare the way of the Lord!*” is the truth that it is not we who prepare ourselves, but the Word who prepares us.

Think about it this way, “*In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis,*

and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,” if the word of God had not come to John, if John had not proclaimed, would any one have prepared for the coming of the Lord?

No. They would have simply gone about their days just as they did every day. It's only when the word comes to the Baptist and he proclaims it that they are awoken from the deep slumber of everyday life to the news that God is coming, that they need to be prepared.

And so it is the word that prepares them. It prepares them by calling them to repentance. It prepares them by speaking repentance – a turning toward God – into their hearts and minds, so that they may receive the forgiveness of sins.

But what does this mean for us? What does it mean for us who live after the Lord has come? Is John's message meant for us? Of course it is.

Just as they waited for the Lord to come so do we. They waited for Him to come and bring salvation, and that is what He has done in His life, death, resurrection. He has won salvation for us, for you. Now we wait for His return. We wait for His return and the passing away of all that stands in opposition to Him and leads us away from Him. And as we do so, still the Word prepares us for His coming.

Now it is not a lone prophet in the wilderness who proclaims, *“Prepare the way of the Lord!”* Now it's the Church. It is the Church who bears His word to us, who wakes us from our slumber, to the truth that we must be prepared. We must be prepared in both senses of that phrase, “You and I need to be ready, and we need to be made ready.”

It's the word and only the word that will do that. Without the word we have no inkling that we are unready, that we are unprepared. Apart from the word life goes on as usual day after day. But the word comes, it comes to you, and says, “HEY! Prepare the way of the Lord!” Are you ready? Ready for God to stand before you in all His holiness and righteousness?

The word comes and it looks at your heart, your mind, your body, your soul, and asks, what here is a barrier to Christ's coming? What valleys of despair lie in your heart? What mountains of sin have been erected? And the word comes, to you and says, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" The Lord is coming and no valley will keep Him from you. No mountain is unpassable for Him. Prepare the way of the Lord, and that's what the word does. It fills the valleys of despair with faith. It names the mountains of sin and tears them down. For the word will not allow anything to stand in the way of the Lord.

The crooked paths of sin that wind their way through the darkness of our hearts are straightened and the light of the God is shone upon them, wherever God speaks, "*Prepare the way of the Lord!*" For God's word does what it promises.

And it does so, so that "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*" All flesh? That's a curious phrase! Because it doesn't leave open the possibility that this preparation, this word of God is not for you. There is no valley too deep that faith cannot fill it. There is no mountain of sin so high that the forgiveness Christ has won cannot wash it away.

All flesh shall see the salvation of God? Put your hand to your chest. Are you made of flesh? Then this promise applies to you. You shall see the salvation of God. And you have! Right there upon the cross! See your salvation, take heart, and believe. For this is for you.

Your sin is great, of that you are certain. So now hear His word for what it says, for that is even more certain, "Your Savior is greater. And He is coming!"

This is the word the Church speaks to you and through you to the world. The Church, like the Jordan river, is the place where civilization and the presence of God come together. This is the place where the cares of the world, the busyness of life ceases for just a moment. Just long enough each week that the word of God can come through to you.

It comes through to you so that once again you are awoken. Once again you are prepared as you are led to repentance and to receive God's word, and are nourished on the body and blood of God himself.

As it enters you, it blossoms into faith, and bears fruit in love for your neighbor. In love for husband, for wife, for children, for mom and dad, for siblings. It bears fruit as you take up your vocation. Having straightened your paths, and filled in your valleys, and torn down your mountains, the salvation of God is shown forth from you.

Now you are the one through whom Jesus will prepare others for His coming. You are the one who carries John's message, "*Prepare the way of the Lord.*" You are the one sent with the word of God in your heart and mind, and on your lips, so that all flesh may see the salvation of God.

And just like John the Baptist you are sent into real time and real history. In the second year of President Trump, when Richard was governor of Michigan, and Elizabeth and Wilma were bishops, the word of God came to you. It came to you that you may bring it to your spouse, to your children, to your friends and neighbors, even strangers.

For this is what they need to hear, "Prepare the way of Lord! Jesus is coming! Just as He promised. Jesus is coming and the word of God has come to make you ready. Do not be afraid, every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, for your Savior comes. He comes to you, He comes to me. Amen. Come, Lord, Jesus.