

Advent 2, 12.5.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

“Prepare the Way”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Each year on the Second Sunday of Advent we read the gospel story about John the Baptist. Using the words of Isaiah, John’s voice cried in the wilderness, “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*” Traditionally, the key word for the Second Sunday in Advent is the word “Prepare.” So it is probably appropriate to ask, “How do you spend the season of Advent?” How do you prepare for the coming of Christ Jesus? What helps you prepare the way of the Lord?

John the Baptist was quoting Isaiah 40:3-5, about preparing the way of the Lord, the way of the King of kings. It is a situation that would have been well understood in the ancient world. A king proposed to make a tour of his domains, and a messenger would be sent ahead of the king’s arrival so that people could prepare the roads enabling the king to arrive quickly and safely.

John is Isaiah’s messenger, calling the world to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, Jesus the Christ. What simply amazes me is that John’s words have gone out from Palestine into all the world and are now read in nearly every language and in every culture around the world. Every year, John’s words go out to the ends of the earth, calling people to “prepare” their hearts for the coming of the Lord. Again this year, John calls you to prepare the paths, roads and expressways to your hearts for the coming of Christ Jesus.

John’s announcement is the request *par excellence* because it is really asking us about two significant things. First, what are the obstacles – bumps, potholes and mountain-like barricades – to our hearts? In other words, have we taken care of our spiritual lives so that Christ may easily enter our hearts to find a home therein? Or have we neglected prayer, works of compassion, and grateful giving so that we find it hard to prepare for Jesus’ birth in our hearts?

Second, is preparing for Christ made difficult because we have allowed someone else or something else to rule in our hearts? John’s cry in the wilderness “to prepare the way” begs the question, “What or who do you normally let into your heart?” What ideas, things and other lords of this world do you let into your heart? In other words, who or what is the day-to-day ruler of your heart? It’s a question worth thinking about.

After John speaks of making the highway of the Lord level and smooth, he says, “*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*” Again, this is where we see that the entire world, all flesh, all humanity around the world, is to be made aware of the coming of Jesus. Literally every language

and culture has carols and hymns that reflect a joyful preparation of the heart for Christmas. As an example of this, today this church will host a concert “*The Glorious Sounds of Christmas*,” as we prepare our hearts for Christ Jesus at Christmas. The concert today is at 5 pm; all are welcome.

Yet the joyfulness of John’s message is not simply lighthearted joy. John is speaking of a profound joy that enters our lives when we prepare for the coming of Jesus. When John the Baptist calls for a preparation of the heart he is really calling us to strengthen our prayer life. Paul speaks of joy and prayer in today’s reading from Philippians. Let’s take a moment to think about this.

Paul writes, “*I thank my God every time I remember you.*” In these amazing words we see that community in Christ is what gives Paul joy. Paul’s words radiate joy. For Paul, Christianity is not some dour, austere religion; it is an experience of Christ that gives joy to every aspect of his life. And the central aspect that radiates joy for Paul is found in prayer; Paul and the Philippians are one in prayer. They experience unity in Christ through prayer. We might say that a church that prays and worships together will experience joy in outward service to the world. During Advent, as we prepare for the coming of Christ, we radiate joy outward toward all the world. Paul describes the outcome of being one in prayer, writing, “*all of you share in God’s grace with me.*” The joy of Christian fellowship is to know that others also share God’s grace with you.

Paul goes on from verse 9 to describe the content of his prayer: “*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*”

This is a long sentence, so let’s look at it in parts. First Paul writes that the purpose of his prayer is “*that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.*” Paul’s prayer is that we will, more and more, have knowledge and insight into what is best for our congregation and it’s mission for Christ in this world. Paul’s prayer wasn’t simply a private request; Paul’s prayer is a request to set the direction of mission for the church at Philippi, and his words also apply to us.

Like John the Baptist, calling people to “prepare” for the coming of the Messiah, Paul’s prayer is that we will know and act with insight into God’s plan for our lives and our church. For Paul, prayer is the highway of the Lord into our hearts, allowing us to plan and envision the future with Christ. This is precisely what we are doing at St. Mark’s with our expanded music ministry and our search for a Director of Family Ministry. We are prayerfully seeking to prepare the way of Christ, leveling the road and allowing him into our hearts, our church, and the world around us.

Paul continues, “*so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.*” The insight and action that come from prayer are *so that* you may be pure and blameless “*having produced a harvest of righteousness.*” Paul is encouraging us to see that our work as a Christian community is to produce a harvest, or in today’s language to produce mission “outcomes,” helping further the mission of Christ’s church.

The church continues to exist because of its harvest, its outcomes allowing God’s grace to expand and grow in the world. For 162 years St. Mark’s has been in mission, and we have received what has been handed on to us *so that* we might continue to produce a harvest for this generation. We are preparing for the future. Advent is always about preparing for the present and future mission of Christ in this world.

Paul ends this thought about the harvest by pointing to its source, writing, “*that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*” The harvest or the outcomes of the mission of the church, come through Jesus Christ “*for the glory and praise of God.*” Our work as a church has one simple but clear goal, we do everything for the glory and praise of God. This is where the joy is. The joy is in knowing Christ and his benefits and allowing Christ to live in us, work through us, and prepare the way to a harvest for all people in this world. The church engages in mission so that all people will know they are unconditionally loved by God.

John the Baptist’s cry in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, and Paul’s prayer about the day of Christ, are about purifying our hearts as we watch and look for the Messiah. This is what the prophet Malachi speaks of today – the only ones who will be able to endure this day are those who are pure – who have been purified like gold and silver in the refiner’s fire.

Prayer is the refiner’s fire that allows God to dwell in us, burning off the impure things in our lives – the stuff of this world that gets in the way. What John, Paul and Malachi are suggesting is not terribly complicated, but it is profound. Our new life as Christians begins every moment that we turn to God in prayer seeking forgiveness, direction and insight helping us determine what is best, what is the best plan at this moment in time for the mission of Christ in this world.

When I was a missionary in Japan, I came to understand more clearly the meaning of John’s words about “all flesh” seeing God’s salvation by being able to pray, worship and participate in another language in the global church. One thing that many Japanese churches do every single year, year in and year out, is an annual all-parish retreat, which is meant to be a time to renew the mutual mission of the church for Christ in this world. Such retreats usually have a theme, time for sharing, and time for prayer together. It’s different than an annual meeting and a lot more fun because,

together, the church prays, discusses and dreams together – as a church – about our mission for Christ in this world. It probably helps that there’s also usually a potluck lunch and fellowship to nourish us, as shared time in prayer and discussion also nourish our souls.

At the beginning of a new church year, Advent allows us to intentionally set our agenda again. Advent is a time to open our hearts in prayer and imagine the harvest that comes only through Jesus Christ alone. Imagine what the world would be like if the church did not exist. Think about it; what if no one paid attention to John’s voice crying in the wilderness, if no one opened the royal highway of their hearts to welcome Jesus Christ the Savior of the world. Just imagine a world where people did not pray for one another, where people did not have insight and knowledge into God’s grace.

Imagine a world what was only about greed, violence, and war. Imagine a world without the knowledge of a loving God. Would you want to live in such a world? Paul, and churches like the one a Philippi, were involved in mission for the survival of the gospel in this world. Early Christians like Paul won the ancient world over with a gospel about love and forgiveness for all.

Like the Philippians and Paul, we are always involved in the life and death struggle for the gospel in the world. Paul wrote about the purpose of Christian mission, that our *“love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help [us] to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ [we] may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”* This is what we are about at St. Mark’s. This is what we recommit our hearts to preparing for during Advent – the coming of Christ into our lives and into our world with a deep love and grace that makes all people sisters and brothers.

As much as I like the cultural Christmas, I have to admit that it can get in the way at times. For John, Paul and the Philippians, there were no Christmas parties, no twinkling lights, no presents, no Santa, none of these things, there was only a love supreme of Jesus Christ that reigned supreme in their hearts.

In a world that does its best to distract us from the greatest gift anyone could ever receive, John tells us again, *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”* During Advent, prepare the royal highway to your heart. The King of kings, the Savior of the world, Jesus the Christ wishes to dwell in the manger of your heart again.

Prepare the way, so that with knowledge and insight we might we continue in mission, producing a harvest for the day of Christ. Prepare the way. This is what we do as followers of Jesus. Amen.