

## ***Advent: Preparing the Way for Jesus***

John the Baptist was the prophet to bridge the Old and New Testaments (Luke 7:28). He was a powerful, Spirit-anointed preacher, and we do well to listen to his message about how we also must prepare the way for Jesus. Follow as I read **Luke 3:3-18**, our New Testament reading:

<sup>3</sup> *He (John) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,* <sup>4</sup> *as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.*

<sup>5</sup> *Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;*

<sup>6</sup> *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

<sup>7</sup> *John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”* <sup>8</sup> *Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.* <sup>9</sup> *Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

<sup>10</sup> *And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”* <sup>11</sup> *In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”* <sup>12</sup> *Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”* <sup>13</sup> *He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”* <sup>14</sup> *Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”*

<sup>15</sup> *As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,* <sup>16</sup> *John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.* <sup>17</sup> *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

<sup>18</sup> *So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

The theme of the preaching of John the Baptist was “Prepare the way of the Lord, as he quoted the Prophet Isaiah.” John’s role was to make way for Jesus’ public ministry. This Advent Season, as we prepare for our Christmas celebration, let’s consider how John challenges us to prepare the way for Jesus, welcoming him into our lives and world.

For the arrival of a dignitary there's long been the tradition of "rolling out the red carpet." That red carpet signals all is prepared, after the pavement has been smoothed out and all the barriers removed. As far back as the ancient Greeks there's been the ceremonial rolling out of the red carpet to welcome the important guest. Often on the news you can see the red carpet on airplane tarmacs and the corridors of government, where dignitaries are received. To roll out the red carpet has come to mean "to give a special welcome to someone important." "The Red Carpet Season" is when the traditional red carpet is rolled out in Hollywood, welcoming television and movie stars to the award presentations of the Golden Globe, Emmys, Oscars, and other performance awards.

The work and the message of John the Baptist was one of preparation. He was preparing the way and setting the stage for Jesus Christ to begin his public ministry. And the message he proclaimed in the wilderness was the urgency of preparing for the appearing of Jesus, first through true repentance.

God is a God of redeeming love, who seeks out his lost sheep, drawing them to a change of mind and direction. Repentance (metanoia) is a reversal of life direction, away from self-will, and doing an about-face toward God and obedience to his will. And John offered baptism as an outward expression of this genuine repentance.

The Jews had been practicing baptism of proselytes who were "converted" from paganism to Judaism, embracing the Law of the Old Covenant. There were also occasional baptisms as symbolic of ritual purification for temporal cleansings. But John called for a repentance that meant a once and for all turning to the living God, and not just a matter of changing religious observance and tradition. And true repentance meant a permanent change of heart and life direction, and not just occasional expressions of regret for one's misdeeds.

Obviously, some who came for John's baptism were not spiritually prepared for it to be an expression of genuine repentance. Even today there are those who rely on church rituals and sacraments, which without a living faith are meaningless and deceptively dangerous. And some, like in John's audience, are relying on their parent's religion or goodness to somehow give them merit with God. But the Baptizer is saying that God has no spiritual grandchildren. Everyone must give an account for a response to God's command for repentance and offer of saving grace.

God doesn't seek after or depend on people with religious credentials. In fact, religious pride can be a barrier to keep us from God's grace. John says, as he looks at some stones in the hard desert ground, that God is able to change stones into converts (8). Ezekiel the Prophet looked to the New Covenant Day when he prophesied that the Lord would give us new hearts and would put a new

spirit in us: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (36:26).

When we see such egregious terrorism by radical haters, it’s as though they have hearts of stone. Yet God is able to raise dead stones to life. And I believe God doesn’t depend on our effective military, diplomatic or even evangelism strategy. God is able to raise up “stones” (like radicalized terrorists) to become his new people. Lives must and can be changed by the Spirit of God.

That’s why my pastor friend, a former Egyptian Muslim, continues to preach Christ in the Arabic Evangelical Church, in an Islamic section of Brussels, where some of the terrorists in Paris have been living. Ishak believes Jesus changes hearts.

John answers the crowd by saying God expects repentance that shows a changed life and practical actions and not just words, caring for others in practical and sacrificial ways, giving clothing to those in need; being honest in one’s dealings (11-14).

Among the Jews, tax collectors were the scum of the earth and the most despised of all people. They were fellow Jews who had sold themselves out to the occupying Romans and served the Romans by collecting the Roman tax from their fellow Jews. And the soldiers were also frequently despised, because they too often exploited their power to extort bribes from the people. Interestingly, John didn’t say they should quit their jobs, but rather should work honestly at their jobs. Repentance requires that we live upright and godly lives in the world where we live as God’s missional people.

In his parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus speaks of how those who are his sheep give evidence of grace in their feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, receiving the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner. In so doing, Jesus said, they were actually ministering to him. And those who neglect to do likewise give evidence that they are in character “goats” (Matthew 25:31-46). Being made righteous, in other words, is more than a judicial change of status. True repentance brings righteous actions, which will be the basis for Jesus’ judgment.

It’s likely that the people in John’s audience were overwhelmed by the thought of true repentance. Perhaps they were saying, “Not only what can we do, but now, how can we possibly live this way, of selfless generosity and loving sacrifice toward others? OKAY, these are the right things to do, but how can we possibly live up to these standards of true repentance?” They wait expectantly for an answer, and then wonder if John the Baptizer might be the anointed one, the Christ, who could help them in this new way of living.

John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as the one whose baptizing was far more effective than was his. Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (16). John's was a baptism of repentance, but Jesus' would be a baptism of regeneration, of remaking through the power of the Spirit. John refers to the superiority of Christ and his uniqueness as the one who alone can change our nature. Repentance turns us toward Jesus, and then Jesus, by his Spirit in us, enables us to be his people who act differently from the world.

Regeneration' or 'new birth' (Titus 3:5; John 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:3) describes the inner renewal by the Spirit of God, which takes place when a person becomes a follower of Jesus. When anyone turns from sin and trusts in Jesus, God justifies that person, giving him or her a new standing of being forgiven and of belonging to God's eternal family. But there's also the experience of the rebirth that continues to transform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

John was called to be a trailblazer, one who prepared a way for Jesus to begin his public ministry. He laid the groundwork for Jesus. He pointed the way for others to meet Jesus. We too are called to not only know him, but to make him known. We are also to be trailblazers, introducers and priests, bridge-builders (pontifex) from our associates to the Lord Jesus. This we can do only through the baptism of the Spirit.

This Spirit-filled life, as was true for John the Baptist, is a life that's victorious even in the face of persecution. The Spirit-empowered life is the cruciform way of living, the way of the cross. John's Spirit-filled life ended in arrest and martyrdom (18-20). It appeared that those worldly authorities won out over John. But Luke knew the great reversal of the kingdom of God, which he first recorded in Mary's Song (Luke 1:51-55). The witness of John the Baptist would triumph and in the eternal kingdom he would be vindicated and compensated.

In the wake of horrible mass killings and fearsome prospects of yet more terrorist attacks, as followers of Christ we seem so small and weak, and from the world's perspective, we are. Yet this is our Advent message. In living with the weak power of the cross we're preparing the way for the Virgin-born, suffering, crucified and risen Lord Jesus. This preparing the way for Jesus is the ongoing cruciform life of dying to self and taking up one's cross to follow him. To experience his fullness of grace and power requires a lifestyle of repentance. I daily must pray for a repenting mind, turning from self-centeredness and self-indulgence toward the way of the cross.

Our first pastorate, which we as newlyweds began serving when it was a mission and served for the six years we did seminary and graduate studies, was in a small Indiana town about an hour's drive north of Louisville, Kentucky. The entire town of North Vernon was amazed and wild with excitement when the President accepted an invitation to dedicate a plaque in the courthouse, commemorating the town as the birthplace of the President's mother. As soon as the invitation

was officially accepted, the entire county began extensive preparation. Not only was a red carpet laid, but also entire streets were re-paved and buildings along the route of the President's motorcade were refurbished and repainted. And on the big day, June 24, 1971, everyone in town was ready. People lined the streets, waving flags and holding banners and signs of praise and welcome to the President of the United States. A year later Richard M Nixon was charged in the infamous Watergate conspiracy and subsequently became the only US president to resign from office.

We are privileged to prepare a place for Jesus Christ, the perfect Leader and Ruler, the Hope of the world. And the Good News is that we're transformed and honored by his presence. We can this Advent Season, "roll out the red carpet," receive him as an honored guest and King of Glory.