

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 5, 2021**

**“Prepare the Way of the Lord”
Luke 3:1-6**

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Are we ready for Advent? At times, we can get so lost in the details of preparations, the busyness of preparations, that we forget to prepare for the most important thing. We pack everything we need to go snowshoeing (except for those things—what are they called?—snowshoes!); we arrive at the mechanic nice and early to have our winter tires changed over (if only we’d remembered the tires). Sometimes, we get so distracted by the many details of preparations that we end up never really preparing—and sometimes we’re prepared for everything except for the one thing that matters most.

And I think at Advent, maybe more than at any other time of year, we can be wrongly prepared: it’s this season when we’re prepared for many things except that which is now most important. Think of all the preparations that get activated by the start of Advent: we find a tree in a parking lot, or pull one out of the crawl-space to assemble; we open up boxes labelled “X-mas Decorations” and adorn the home; we wrap gifts for loved ones, and write cards. With Christmas just weeks away, we want to be ready, we want to be prepared.

So many preparations, so many details—but are we ready, are we prepared for what’s most important? Are we ready for Advent? Are we ready for Christ? Enter John the Baptist, who answers these questions with one resounding “No!” John the Baptist is that untamed preacher who stands guard every Advent as the gatekeeper to Christmas: we might wish to reach the heartwarming scenes of the Nativity, but first we’ve got to get past him. John the Baptist is a sort of bouncer, blocking our access to the manger, turning us away if we’re not ready: if we ask John, “Amid our many preparations, are we ready for Advent?” John’s answer comes back: “No!” We are *not* ready, John declares, so it’s time to prepare:

“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah
in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins,
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”’” (vv. 2-4).

Now, in our Gospel Lesson, what does this preparation look like? What sort of preparation does John demand? The image is concrete and bracing; listen to it: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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” (vv. 4-5). What’s this all about? What’s the action described here? It’s something you’ve seen many times,

a veritable Canadian tradition: it's roadwork! "Prepare the way," or "prepare the road" as the original language also means (ὁδός). Here, preparing for Christ is described like roadwork, like building a highway through the wilderness.

When I was a minister up in North Bay, they were expanding and rebuilding Highway 11. Whenever I'd make the trip down to Toronto, I could see the new highway in different stages of preparation along the way. In some places, they were building up new overpasses and bridges, and in other places they were blasting out rock: building up and breaking down, "valley[s] [...] filled" and "mountain[s] [...] made low." In some places, they were laying new sod beside the highway, and in other places they were ripping up trees: creating the new and clearing out the old, "crooked [ways] [...] made straight" and "rough ways made smooth." John tells us that preparing for the coming Christ means building highways for God to enter in: the roots of sin need to be ripped up, and the sod of kindness needs to be planted; the rocks of hate need to be blasted out, and the bridges of reconciliation need to be built one stone at a time.

John, our Gospel Lesson tell us, came "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3)—and the image of roadwork shows us what this repentance looks like. The word for 'repentance' here (μετάνοια) means, literally, 'to turn around': it's about turning away from brokenness and lovelessness, and turning toward God and God's compassion. And this image of roadwork makes clear that repentance is intense, involved, uncomfortable. John tells us that to get ready for Advent, to get ready for Christ, we've got to turn *away* and turn *toward*: we've got to break down the mountains of meanness, and fill up the valleys of compassion; we've got to break through the crooked ways of injustice, and build up the smooth ways of kindness. This Advent, we've got roadwork to do!

So how did John's hearers receive his call to roadwork? Well, in what follows just after our Gospel Lesson this morning, the crowd does something very brave indeed, something that opens them up to the challenges of responsibility. After John tells them they've got to prepare for the Lord like roadwork, breaking down and building up, there comes this stunning moment when the crowd does something really gutsy. Luke writes: "And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?'" (v. 10). Can you believe that? What a brave question! What-should-we-do? Any question as open-ended as that leaves you vulnerable, exposed—especially when the person you're asking is *John the Baptist*. Yet one after the other, group after group, they come and ask John that same brave question: they have the courage to ask this preacher what repentance will look like *for them*, what spiritual roadwork they've each got to do to prepare for the Lord.

"And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' 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'" (vv. 10-14).

The common themes here are generosity, mercy, justice (cf. Beach-Verhey), but—in each case—repentance takes a different shape. As one scholar explains: “Each group receives a practical answer: care for the needy and practice truth and justice. [Yet] he commands each group slightly differently, according to their roles and possessions. He admonishes the crowds to share their wealth [...]. He commands the tax collectors to be fair and honest in their work [...] known for corruption and greed. The soldiers [...] are warned about the greed that their position enabled them” to exploit (Kamell). Repentance looks different depending on who’s doing the repenting, just as roadwork looks different depending whether it’s rocks being removed or bridges built. We each need to repent and prepare in different ways: each of us has parts of our lives that need to be broken down and brought low (our meanness, our bitterness), and each of us has parts of our lives that need to be built up and lifted high (our gifts, our gratitude). And notice, nowhere does John tell anyone to just keep doing what they’re doing, carry on, and maintain the status quo: *no one* is prepared for the Lord, so *everyone* has work to do to make a way for Christ.

I’d like you to imagine, for a moment, that you are there in that crowd. Each group has gone up and asked John that same brave question—“what should we do?”—and each has received a different challenge, a different call to repentance. They’ve each been told the roadwork required, the injustice to break down and the mercy to build up, the ways that each group and individual must prepare the road for Christ.

Now imagine it’s your turn. Imagine that you have the courage to walk up to John the Baptist, to look that untamed preacher straight in the eye, and to ask him that same brave question: “How can I prepare? What must I do, to prepare for the Lord?” What would John the Baptist say to you? It could be quite hard, I expect, maybe not something you’d be glad to hear...yet, for every group, John only makes practical demands that are within reach—so it might be hard, but it’s something you can do. What would it be? What would John the Baptist say to you? I’m not going to ask any of you to raise your hand and volunteer, but consider this: what would it be? What rock needs to be blasted out of your life to let the Saviour through? What needs to be broken down? And also, what needs to be built up? What in your life needs to be nurtured and encouraged? This Advent, we have many things to make ready, but today John the Baptist has come to make sure we don’t miss the most important. Happy roadwork! Amen.