

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Mark 1:1-8

2nd Sunday in Advent

December 7, 2014

Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

One time many years ago I attended a worship service where all of a sudden, from the back of the church, the song from the musical, “Godspell,” was sung by a solo voice: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord! Prepare ye the way of the Lord!”

This of course was the message and purpose of John the Baptist. John preached a message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in preparing the way for Jesus to come. He made the path straight so that Jesus was able to enter into this world and into people’s lives; so that people could receive Jesus by faith; be baptized with water and the Holy Spirit.

This is the Second Sunday in Advent. Advent means coming, Jesus is coming. It proclaims the truth that Jesus is coming as we celebrate at Christmas his birth in the manger of Bethlehem. Advent also proclaims the truth that Jesus is coming again at his second Advent; he is coming again to take all who believe in him to live with him forever.

Therefore just like with John the Baptist our call today, yours and mine, is to continue to prepare the way for Jesus to come. Our call is to make his paths straight; to block and lead the interference if you will so that Jesus can come today, right now, into people’s hearts; so that hearts are open and ready to receive Jesus by faith.

You may ask, however, how can I prepare the way for Jesus to come? I’m not a trained evangelist or preacher. I don’t have any clothing of camel’s hair, and I don’t like locusts and wild honey. How can I do anything which would help Jesus to come?

This morning in this message I will highlight several ways that we can all prepare the way. One of the most important ways is for parents in bringing up their children. Studies have found time and again that our children learn the most from our example; they learn to know Jesus in the most real way through our example of faith; of worship; of prayer; of life values.

I like to use the illustration of teaching something like the 10 Commandments. Some parents want the church (Sunday School; Confirmation) to teach them to their children. Now some children, of course, can learn and even memorize all the words perfectly. Yet if in their home a child’s parents put sports, money and other things before God, how will they ever know how to live with no other gods before our God?

In the same way if parents only worship once in awhile or when it is convenient, how will their kids ever know how to “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy?” If children never hear their parents talk about Jesus as their friend; if they never hear them explain how Jesus lives in their hearts, how will they ever learn how to use God’s name in a positive way?

It has often been said that Christianity is more caught than taught. Children pick it up from what they experience from their parents in their home. Therefore it doesn't work to pass it off on the church or anyone else. The truth is that with matters of faith and knowing Jesus, children look first to the example of their parent(s) to see if it is real.

This also includes fathers. Kids are watching their Dad's like a hawk to see if Jesus is real to them. They are watching to see whether faith for them is a living and life-long relationship, or whether it is something that only they as kids are somehow supposed to do through being dropped off at Sunday School and Confirmation.

To prepare the way, I believe, is our most important; our number one calling as parents. Nurturing faith in Jesus is far more important than being great athletes; musicians; dancers. This takes, however, a commitment to Jesus that begins with each parent. It is to commit one life, just like Joshua in the Old Testament did and said, *"But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* (Joshua 24:15)

Parents prepare the way as they commit to faithful family worship; by putting their words into action through the values and example by which they live; by seeking to learn and grow in one's own faith through reading, Bible study, mission service and classes. Faith centered parents growing in their own discipleship helps to prepare the way.

A second way to prepare the way for Jesus to come is in/through the example of our lives at work and in the community. This, of course, has sometimes been a terrible accusation against us church people; we say and act one way in church yet then live and act differently in other parts of our being. We may say the words of pious faith on Sundays while our daily existence is filled with vulgar language, questionable honesty, uncontrollable temper, easily compromised morals.

We can learn from the recent sports and political scandals how easily morality and integrity can be compromised. Whether it is trying to have a winning sport's program; trying to win a business account; trying to get a promotion; trying to be popular it is so easy to marginalize what is right. It is easy to live two different lives.

We prepare the way, my friends, by seeking to live our faith in all parts of who we are. By having our faith influence our words, our relationships, our decisions. In order to do this, of course, we need a good Christian friend or mentor to help keep us accountable; we can't do it by ourselves. An individual who seeks to live their faith and example in every area is a powerful witness for Christ; this truly helps prepare the way.

A third way to prepare the way for Jesus to come is through the witness of our words. Sometimes it may be fairly simple in using our words to invite someone to come to church; to a Bible study or whatever. It may be telling someone about a children's program; letting them know about how excited we are about a music service or a special event.

On the other hand, however, sometimes our words may be called on to defend our faith, to stand up for what is right, to speak words of truth. As the Bible says in 1 Peter 3:15, *“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”*

This may mean speaking up when someone mocks or makes fun of Christianity; when someone says things that go against Biblical truth. It may mean speaking up and saying to someone that you don’t appreciate their foul language; are offended by their humor that tears down the sacredness of marriage and of sexuality. It may mean letting someone know how much we care about them knowing Jesus; sharing with them what Jesus means to us.

Now I know some of us may say, “Oh, I could never do that. I wouldn’t know what to say.” Yet the truth is that we should never be satisfied with hiding behind our excuses. We should all want to learn more, to discover more Bible truths, to feel more confident in our faith. We should all want to witness for Jesus with our words.

Another way for us to prepare the way for Jesus to come is through generous lives centered on the giving of our time, our talents and financial support. It is true that every great ministry, whether it was the Apostle Paul or an evangelist like Billy Graham, all have or still rely on financial support. This is also true for us: our ministry at Messiah; our mission and outreach to the community; our programs for children and youth (which we grew in staff time the past couple years; all rely on the support of people like you and me.

One of the things I have learned over the years is that some people have the wonderful gift of making money. And as we all know, “you can’t take it with you, but you can send it on ahead.” Generous financial support helps our church and each one of us to prepare the way.

The final way we can prepare the way for Jesus to come is through prayer. Even if we are elderly, confined to our homes, unable to give financial support, we can pray. We need more and more people who will diligently pray for our church, our staff, our mission, our children and youth, for reaching those who are seeking to connect with Jesus.

Our vision at Messiah is to develop an even stronger prayer ministry. We had a woman in my previous church who gave a faith testimony where she said that it was when someone prayed out loud for her face to face, and when she learned to pray with and for others, that Jesus and her faith became real. Prayer brings us into a close relationship with Jesus and with others.

Prepare the way! John was the voice crying in the wilderness. The good news, my friends, is that God is calling you and me, his church, to prepare the way for his coming in people’s hearts. Let us do this through our example as parents; our example at work and in our daily activities; through the witness of our words; through generous and giving lives; through our prayers.

“Prepare the way of the Lord.”