

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 8, 2024**

**“Prepare the Way”
Luke 3:1-14**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

It's the Second Sunday of Advent: are you ready for Christmas? Sometimes, we can get so overwhelmed by the many details of preparations that we end up forgetting to prepare for the most important thing. You know what that's like: you go to the grocery store to pick up just one thing, and then get home with everything except that one thing; or you arrive at the mechanic nice and early to get your winter tires changed over, but you forget to bring those (oh, what are those things called?) tires! Sometimes, we get so distracted by the many details of preparations that we end up preparing for everything—except for the one thing that matters most.

And I think—more than any other time of year—this happens in Advent. I think this is the season when we prepare for so many little things...except for the one thing that's most important. Think of all the preparations we do during Advent: maybe you go pick out a tree in a parking lot, or maybe you drag out your artificial tree (stored in its original—now ancient—cardboard box); you open up bins labelled “X-mas Decorations”; you make plans to travel to see family or maybe to host them; you wrap gifts for loved ones. With Christmas just weeks away, we want to be ready; we want to be prepared.

So many preparations, so many details—but are we really ready? Are we preparing for the most important thing? Enter John the Baptist, who answers with a definite “No.” I just love John the Baptist: there he is, munching on grasshoppers, this untamed preacher who stands guard every Advent as the gatekeeper to Christmas. We'd like to see the heartwarming Nativity scene, but first we gotta get past him. John the Baptist is like a holy bouncer, blocking our access to the manger—and turning us away because we are not ready.

Are we ready for Christmas? Are we ready for Christ? No, John tells us, we're not ready—at least, not yet. 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).

And what does that look like? What does it mean to prepare for the Lord? Well, next we hear a quotation from Isaiah that uses a very concrete image—but it's easy to miss what it's about:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,” we hear,
“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).

So what’s this describing? It’s actually something you’ve seen many times—in fact, for the last year in London, you’ve seen this probably more than you wanted to... It’s roadwork! What we have as “[p]repare the way” can also be translated as “prepare the road” (ὁδός). It turns out that preparing for Christ is like roadwork; it’s like building a highway through the wilderness.

When I was ordained as a minister, now over 15 years ago, my first charge was a church up in North Bay (which is as cold as it sounds). At the time, they were rebuilding and expanding Highway 11—which runs from North Bay down to Toronto, where it meets up with the 400. When Meredith and I would drive down to Toronto, we could see this new highway at different stages of preparation along the way.

In some places, they were building up new overpasses and bridges; in other places they were blasting out bedrock: building up and breaking down, “valley[s] [...] filled” and “mountain[s] [...] made low.” In some places, they were laying new sod beside the highway; in other places, they were ripping out boulders: creating the new and clearing out the old, “crooked [ways] [...] made straight” and “rough ways made smooth.” John tells us that preparing for Christ means preparing a way for God, building a highway for God to enter in: the boulders of bitterness 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.

Our Gospel Lesson says that John came “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 3)—and this image of roadwork shows us what repentance looks like. Repentance is about breaking down and building up, breaking down the habits of lovelessness, and building up God’s kindness and compassion. And when repentance is described like roadwork, it makes you realize that it’s intense, involved, uncomfortable. Yet John tells us that this is the way to prepare for Christ: it’s hard work, this breaking down and building up...but it’s Advent—and we’ve got roadwork to do!

Now when that crowd heard John speak, they did something very brave—something I don’t think we’d have the guts to do if we met John the Baptist. He told them they need to prepare for the Lord like roadwork, then this is how the crowd responded: they “asked him, ‘What then should we do?’” (v. 10). Can you believe that? What-should-we-do? They’re leaving themselves wide open here—yet one after the other, they step up and ask John that same brave question: they have the courage and openness to ask what repentance will look like for them, what spiritual roadwork they each must 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).

There are themes here (generosity, mercy, justice [cf. Beach-Verhey]); but repentance means something different to everyone. As one scholar puts it: "Each group receives a practical answer: care for the needy and practice truth and justice. [Yet John] commands each group slightly differently [...]: the crowds to share their wealth [...]; the tax collectors to be fair and honest [...]; [t]he soldiers [...] warned about [...] greed" (Kamell).

Repentance looks different for each, just as roadwork looks different whether it's rocks being removed or bridges built. We each need to repent and prepare in different ways; we each have parts of our lives that need to be broken down and brought low (our impatience, our bitterness), and we each have parts of our lives that need to be built up and lifted high (our kindness, our gratitude). And notice, John doesn't tell anyone to just keep doing what they're doing: no one is prepared for the Lord, so everyone must repent, everyone must break down and build up; everyone has roadwork to do to make way for Christ.

Now imagine that you were in that crowd. Imagine that everyone else has been told the repentance required, the roadwork they've got to do. And now it's your turn. Imagine that you have the guts to walk right up to John the Baptist, to look that wild preacher in the eye, and to ask him that same brave question: "What should I do? What must I do, to prepare for the Lord?" What would John the Baptist say to you? It could be quite hard, maybe not something we'd be glad to hear... Yet in our Gospel Lesson, John only makes practical demands that are within reach—so it might be hard, but it's something within our power to do. What would that be? What would John the Baptist say to you?

Pause and consider this: what would John demand of you? What needs to be broken down—what rock needs to be blasted out of your life to let the Saviour through? And what needs to be built up—what in your life needs to be nurtured and encouraged? This Advent, as we get ready for Christmas, there are many things to prepare. But today, John the Baptist is here to make sure we don't forget the most important thing. So what can I say? Happy roadwork! Amen.