
Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 7 December 2025

Isaiah 11:1-10 • Matthew 3:1-12



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Prepare ye the way of the Lord! Jesus and John were cousins, born about the same time. Remember from Luke's Gospel that lovely story of Mary going to visit her cousin Elizabeth? As Mary comes into the house, before she even has a chance to tell Elizabeth her astonishing, her miraculous news, Elizabeth feels her own baby leap in her womb. Elizabeth is already some months pregnant. The joy of that meeting, and the time the two women spent together, must have been great. Elizabeth knew already that the newly-conceived child which Mary was carrying would be no ordinary child, and Mary must certainly have told her the words of the angel Gabriel concerning Jesus, how "he will be great, and he will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David." (Luke 1:32)

And Elizabeth knew that her own child would be great, for the angel had told her husband, Zechariah, that John "would turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God," and "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:16-17) Well, mothers always like to talk about their children, don't they? and

how clever and accomplished they will be? Elizabeth and Mary would have had lots to talk about, during that visit.

John became a prophet. Like Jesus, it's not clear what he did for the first thirty years of his life, since he and Jesus were about the same age, and we believe Jesus's ministry did not start until his thirties. But we find John in the wilderness, preaching the coming of the Messiah. Now, all Judea had been longing for this Messiah — it was predicted by the old prophets, by Isaiah most particularly — and so the message would have been one of special interest to all Jews. I'm not sure why John was preaching *in the wilderness*, rather than in the towns and villages. Perhaps the people in the towns were too busy with their daily lives to listen, and he couldn't be heard over the noise of a busy town. Perhaps the Jews didn't tend to trust a prophet unless he was a bit outlandish, and acted a bit crazy. Here is John with his clothes made of rough camel hides, eating locusts and wild honey, and wandering through the desert crying out for the people to prepare for their Lord. Certainly, this was the way Isaiah predicted the event: "A voice cries out: in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord." Note the phrasing: Matthew tells of a voice in the wilderness, crying out to prepare the way; Isaiah tells of a voice crying out, prepare the way in the wilderness.

But either way, what is important is that the people's salvation would come not from established towns, ruled by emperors and lesser officials, led by chief priests and their assistants, but from an unexpected quarter: a poor child born in a stable. Someone outside of established systems. Someone in the wilderness, the wild places beyond the settled cities.

Jesus came to upset the settled order. His words would outrage the Pharisees and the chief priests, for they threatened their power. Jesus was not an insider — he was very much an outsider, and so was his prophet, John. And the people responded to John, or at least a number of them. We're told that "people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan." (Matt 3:5) Why did they go? Why did they go into the wilderness, into the desert regions away from their comfortable homes and villages, to listen to this half-mad prophet in his ridiculous clothes?

Something in the prophecy John was spreading struck a chord with those people. I think it was akin to the frisson of excitement Elizabeth (and her unborn child) felt when Mary entered the house. A feeling of joy, yes, and also a feeling of rightness. A feeling of welcome. A feeling that God was bringing something about out of his love which would make a big difference in their lives. That's what the Jews had been waiting for, wasn't it? For God to send a Messiah to overturn the established order? A Messiah to help his people?

They came to John and they were baptised and they heard of another one yet to come, the one they were really waiting for, who John said would baptise them with the Holy Spirit. They perhaps didn't fully understand John's message, just as Mary perhaps didn't fully understand Gabriel's message initially, but they knew it was true. That was God's doing, I believe, putting that knowledge, through love, into their hearts and minds. They responded with joy, confessing their sins and preparing themselves, so that they might welcome the Lord when he came. Prepare ye the way of the Lord!

And still today, we are preparing the way of the Lord. The Lord will come again to his people. This of course has two meanings: in this season of Advent, we anticipate again the Christmas story of the baby Jesus, born in the stable among the sheep and oxen, attended by shepherds and Magi — rich and poor, simple and wise. And we also, in this age of our Lord, the age of the Church, look forward to the second coming of Jesus, when he will arrive in his glory and call all his people to himself.

Consider Advent a sort of annual rehearsal. It is good to be reminded that we must prepare for Jesus's coming. We prepare in two ways. First, we keep ourselves in right relationship with God. We do this through regular prayer and confession, and through keeping our priorities straight in our daily lives: we love God first, and then our neighbours as ourselves. As Jesus did, we point away from ourselves, toward God and our fellow humans. In this way, we draw closer to God.

Second, we help others to know the good news of Jesus Christ. In this, we have to be a little bit like John the Baptist. I'm not suggesting you should go get measured for a camel-skin suit, or start adding locusts to your diet — I suppose it would be wetas, here. Although chocolate-covered ones might be okay. But we should not be afraid of being thought a little different, because of our Christian beliefs. We are different. Jesus never told us to fit in. In fact he told us we might be persecuted for following him. In our civil society here, we are fortunate that persecution rarely takes a true physical form, as it does, sadly, in some Middle Eastern and African countries. Here, we will likely experience disbelief or a resistance to talk about religion at all. But our task is clear — to prepare the way of the Lord. That means to prepare the people for the coming of their Lord. As I said last week, God does the real work, speaking into the hearts of his people and encouraging them to respond. But preparation is a good word for what we do, which is to begin the process whereby a non-believer might be ready to answer when God calls.

So, people of God, hear and respond to John's words, coming to us through all the centuries: prepare ye the way of the Lord. Amen.