

## Prepare the Way

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Mal. 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

Advent is full of improbabilities.

Just look at John the Baptist for starters. As you prepare your homes for the holidays, maybe you've been unwrapping angels and Santas and the figures for the manger scene. I'm willing to bet, though, that not a single one of us has a John the Baptist ornament on the tree. There are no John the Baptist Christmas cards or cookie cutters. This weird character doesn't fit our seasonal theme at all.

Imagine somebody like this turning up at your house for a holiday party. He dresses funny. He's all dusty. He refuses to get a haircut or a real job. He needs a special diet. And he has no obvious social graces. But this unkempt, abrasive misfit happens to be the one sent by God to announce the Lord's coming.

The wilderness also seems like a strange place to make such an important announcement. For the people of Israel, of course, wilderness had a special meaning; it meant the Sinai, the place their ancestors had been freed from slavery, then gotten lost again. In the poetic language of prophecy, wilderness can be a state of mind as much as a location. We talk of getting "bewildered." We can get lost and wander through lonely valleys and stub our toes; we can get hungry and thirsty and even go mad. Even in city and suburb, the wilderness is all around us. The wilderness is the war in Afghanistan, the economy, refugees; it's your health, domestic violence, and lonely hearts. The wilderness can be wherever you and I happen to find ourselves this year.

In the wilderness the unlikely prophet cries an unlikely message. Borrowing words from Isaiah he shouts, "*Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.*" He's invoking a practice that goes right back to the days of ancient Babylon. There were hardly any roads at all in those days, so whenever a monarch planned to leave his royal capital to visit his dominions, it was necessary for roads to be built especially for the king and his entourage. So the king would send a messenger out to tell the people, "Get ready! Your king is coming!" Then the king would send out special engineer soldiers called sappers to build a road—filling in any gullies and lopping off the tops of hills to make a road straight and level enough for the king's chariot.

In this little drama, John takes on the role of the herald announcing that the king is coming, and he assigns to us the role of the sappers. He says it's up to us to create the conditions that will make an adequate pathway for the king. That announcement is both good news and bad news. The good news is that THE KING IS COMING! He's actually planning to come *here*, to our corner of the wilderness! The bad news is that preparation for his arrival is going to require some work on our part.

Maybe we would be more excited about the preparation to which we are called if it *were* a matter of physical labor. Church folk often respond well to concrete tasks. If there's a family crisis, the church casserole brigade swings into action. In one church I served, the greatest day in the life of the men was the Sunday morning the parlor ceiling collapsed just before the service. Oh, boy! Get out the tools!

But of course it's not our backs and biceps we have to engage to prepare the way. John's words challenge us to forget about our holiday to-do lists and examine our unready hearts. So how about it? Are you and I ready for God-With-Us? How are your relationships? Are there some gullies that need to be filled in? How about those boulders of resentment over there? That mountain of pride needs to be scraped down a bit.

The preparation to which John calls us to is *metanoia*—repentance—a change of heart. To the comfortable he says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To tax collectors and extortionists he says, "Collect no more than the law allows." To soldiers and people in authority he says, "Don't use your power to make people more miserable." To all of us he says, "Turn away from yourself and turn toward God, because the One who demands repentance, truth, and right living is coming."

As we take the communion elements this morning, we are taking into ourselves the spiritual sustenance to fill the gaps and smooth out the bumps in our individual lives. But if we take it only to make ourselves feel better, we've missed the point. The tiny piece of bread reminds us that Jesus himself was a gap-filler and justice maker. He showed us how to build the highway of justice and peace—build it right here, in this wilderness—and every day each of us is invited to insert the body and blood of our own lives ourselves into the gaps and smooth out the unevenness. Building the highway of justice and peace is the work to which each of us is called.

In the seasonal rush to buy and spend and wrap and bake and decorate, it's easy to forget the real preparation we need to do. Maybe we need a messenger who doesn't fit our expectations of aesthetics or personal hygiene or seasonal cheer to get our attention. Maybe it takes a misfit without social graces to get across the message that we are measured not by our jobs, our incomes, our possessions, or the good opinion of others, but by God's standard of justice with peace.

Hear the message of the prophet: your sovereign is coming, here, to your neighborhood. Prepare! Repent! Rejoice!