

Prepare the Way for the Lord!

A sermon based on Matthew 3:1-12 – *“In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:*

*“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”*

⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This might seem like ancient history to you, but do you remember when they widened the intersection just down the road...at Geist and University? It was only a couple of summers ago when that happened. Do you remember how much of a headache that was? Now, some of you live far enough away you could use a different route for getting to church. But for houses like mine that were almost right in the middle of construction, while the peace and quiet of having less traffic was nice, the traveling was a bit more of a nightmare.

For many, it was an inconvenience for sure, but was it worth it? I would think most of us would agree expanding it was definitely a benefit. Even though there was a price for some locals and businesses to pay, by and large it was worth it to have this new, beautiful intersection.

Well, God’s Word today is telling us about road construction, but not the kind they did at the Geist-University intersection. Matthew writes about getting a road ready, but not for another 15 years’ worth of traffic. No, this morning, we’re going to consider some spiritual road construction John the Baptist

speaks of. And, we'll ask God to help and guide us so we, too, might heed John's call to prepare the way for the Lord.

Now, our verses this morning are an introduction to a man who played a prominent role in setting the scene for the arrival of the Messiah. John the Baptist was always part of God's plan. In Galatians, we're told, "**When the time had fully come, God sent his Son**" (Galatians 4:4). And part of that fullness of time was for John to be on the scene. The prophet Isaiah had identified him years and years before as he wrote of "**a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'**" So, faithful followers knew the Messiah's arrival would be marked by the arrival of a desert preacher. Other prophets called him the messenger who would go before, and one even referred to him as another Elijah. So, one of John's main purposes would simply be to mark that time was fast approaching for the Messiah to appear.

But beyond preparing the way for the Lord, John was also sent to preach a message of preparation to people as well. He told all who would listen, "**Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.**" Now, he surely wasn't asking the crowd to be the fulfillment of that prophecy – Isaiah's prophecy - and be a sign to the world, not in the way he himself was in preparing the way for Jesus. Instead John's goal was for those who heard his message of preparation to do what he was doing for the world...preparing the way for the Lord.

How would they? It's in this. Many heard the law and gospel John preached and were brought to faith in the coming Messiah. They met the Messiah in the words John preached. They followed John's pointing finger and put their trust in the one he identified as "**the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**" (John 1:29). John was a successful preacher, because he used the most powerful tools available to him: God's law and gospel. As he preached, John witnessed the way of the Lord being prepared in people's hearts. Matthew tells us: "**People went out to [John] from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.**"

Unfortunately, John also met a group which came with an entirely different attitude...the Pharisees and Sadducees. And he reserved some pretty serious words for them. Because, you see, they came not in meekness and humility like he was preaching. No, they came with intentions of social and political gain. They came not because they needed spiritual renewal; rather it was arrogance and pride motivating their visit.

Understandably, John wasn't at all receptive to their attitudes. He said, "**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.**" John knew that they were there, not to repent of their sins, but to make their appearance so people would see them "playing along." They came to be baptized not into the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, but rather in the name of putting on a show to maintain their power. So John drives the law home a little deeper for them. He addressed the arrogant attitudes of entitlement they had. They presumed being part of God's chosen people was good enough for them. But John said, "**Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.**"

So John was fed up with the arrogance of those people, but would John be any less frustrated if he came to do his baptizing in the Chena River and stumbled upon this group of "faithful ones"?

I'm guessing he would find some of those same sins in all of us. Are there times when you're merely going through the motions of a spiritual life? We pray before we eat, we worship on Sunday morning, but that more just become your habit – you can be seen, or is it a cognizant choice? How many times are these lessons God teaches in the sermon out of your head before your body is out the door? Like, do you even remember last week's sermon (by the way, it was about preparing for Jesus' return instead of procrastinating)? How many times do you scoff at the applications of God's Word and say "Maybe for someone else, but not for me!" How many times have you looked liked and acted like a churchgoer on Sunday for this hour, but for the other 167 hours of the week it's a different story? I think it happens more than you'd care to admit. And I'm fairly confident because I know me.

You know, sometimes we hear the Advent and even the Lenten calls to repentance, and we simply conclude "I'm good where I'm at!" After all, I am a third generation WELS member (and a pretty faithful one at that!!) I have been going to church all my life and I didn't even stray in my 20s and 30s like so many do." "All of this 'change your lives, live for Jesus, prepare for Jesus stuff' is for everyone else. I'm good where I'm at."

But considering these attitudes dwelling in our hearts and also the hesitancy we all experience when faced with God's command to let go of this sin or that one...when we consider all that, perhaps John's jolting words need to be spoken into all our ears once more. To those who continue in their sins, God says **"The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."** God is deadly serious about his law and he means it when he demands from us the fruit of obedience.

And we don't. Not always. Not perfectly.

You know, this would be our somber and sad realization if this were the close of John's preaching. If this threat of law were the entirety of John's message, then the time for uncontrollable wailing and despair is now!!

But John preaches not only law, but also love. The God he proclaims is not just Judge. He is Savior, too. Where John pointed so many years ago, I now get the privilege to point you today. **Look** to Jesus. He is **"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29). Your sins and mine have been taken away. Your pride and mine was nailed to the cross. The traces of our rote religion and insincere dedication to God and mine are forever removed. And all that remains is the absolute perfection of Christ...covering us. All God sees in you is the perfect life Jesus lived and the eternal worth he earned by his death on the cross. Through faith in Jesus that precious and priceless gift is yours and mine.

So now, as our lives continue to unfold, we're going to continue to heed the Baptist's call. We're going to prepare the way for the Lord...to return, where with God's strength and forgiveness, we can remove the sinful obstacles lying in the way. With continual use of his Word and Sacrament, our faith is strengthened and our preparations continue. With his Word constantly working in our lives – motivating and guiding our actions, we can look forward to the Day when Jesus returns. We can long, with undeterred joy, for that glorious day, knowing the way to eternal glory has already been prepared. Our path is to everlasting life.

John preached, **"Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near,"** and so that's what we're going to do, willingly, knowing those sins we confess have already been atoned for. John preached, **"Prepare the**

way for the Lord,” and we don’t worry about having to that ourselves because Jesus is in charge. The way was already prepared for him. He did all the heavy lifting - lifting the weight of sin and burden of our guilt. And now, he cleans out our hearts and dwells in us. He lives and works in us every day, until the day we will live and rest in his home in glory. Construction in progress here? Oh yeah! But Jesus has come to clean up the mess. And the end result? When he returns, it’ll be worth it. And we’ll be ready! Amen.

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