

“John the Baptist’s Song”

Second in a series of messages: “The Songs of Advent”

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Isaiah 40:1-5, Luke 3:1-18

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,
 ‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
 make straight paths for him.
⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
 every mountain and hill made low.
 The crooked roads shall become straight,
 the rough ways smooth.
⁶ And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’ ”

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ 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.”

¹⁰ “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

¹³ “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. ¹

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Lk 3:1–18). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Back when I was in high school, the musical *Godspell* hit the theater scene. As a musical, it wasn't all that great – I always thought it a bit weird that Jesus and his disciples were portrayed as a bunch of hippie clowns (though I understand the intent – real Christianity is always counter-cultural) - but there were two songs that really stood out. One of them was “Day by Day” – based on a 13th century prayer offered by Saint Richard of Chichester. The prayer is quite beautiful in its simplicity:

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
 for all the benefits thou hast given me,
 for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.
 O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
 may I know thee more clearly,
 love thee more dearly,
 and follow thee more nearly, day by day.
 Amen.

The second song is not so much a “song” as a recurring refrain at the beginning the musical: it's the song of John the Baptist. After three blasts of his shofar John sings: “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord!”

This is, indeed, John's theme song as he arrives on the scene; the musical captures it. He came to fulfill the role prophesied by his father Zechariah at his birth: *“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”*

In fact, the song John sings about preparing the way for the Lord is the very same song sung by the prophet Isaiah centuries before:

“In the desert prepare
 the way for the LORD;
 make straight in the wilderness
 a highway for our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
 every mountain and hill made low;
 the rough ground shall become level,
 the rugged places a plain.
⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
 and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the
 LORD has spoken.”²

When Isaiah sang it, it was a song of comfort and hope to the Jews who were living in captivity in Babylon: *“Comfort ye...comfort ye my people,” it began. Good news! Your time of exile has ended. The Lord is coming to deliver you from bondage and will lead you home. Clear away all the obstacles. Make straight a highway for our God. Jerusalem shall be rebuilt and the whole world shall see the glory of the Lord. Alleluia!”*

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Is 40:3–5). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

As John sings the same song, he too comforts God's people with the announcement of the Lord's imminent arrival. When the Lord comes, he will lead his people out of captivity – but John has in mind a different kind of captivity – captivity to sin. The Lord is coming to lead his people out of bondage to sin into the freedom of a new life.

Good news, to be sure, but John sings his song in a minor key, for there is a note of warning and judgment as well. If the Lord comes, you better be ready to receive him. Time to change your ways!

Lots of people don't like John's tune. But then, prophets are never very popular. They always seem to be singing about stuff people don't want to hear.

To be sure, John draws large crowds at the beginning – after all, anyone who speaks with amazing authority and lives out in the desert and lets his hair grow and wears camel's hair and eats locusts and honey will attract lots of curiosity seekers. But the song John sings is strident – there is a hard edge to it – and it turns a lot of people off. John sings out: *"The Lord is coming, but you folks are far from being ready for him. You've got to clean up your act! You've got to change some of your attitudes. You could to change what you do. You've got to come to terms with the ugliness inside you, take responsibility for the errors of your ways, confess you sins and acknowledge your need for a savior and then bear fruit in keeping with repentance."*

Repentance? Confessing sins? Change our ways? What sort of Christmas song is this, John? *Aren't we good people? Do you know who we are? We are God's chosen people. We have Abraham as our father. Who do you think you are to come down so hard on us?*

And John replies, *"You brood of vipers."* Like I say, John's song is discordant, and even offensive to some.

The sad thing is that many folks would rather not change. They are content with things as they are. They would rather write their own happy songs. They would rather not give up their self-centered ways. They know that if they take the message of Christmas too seriously their lifestyle will have to change and that is too scary a thought. They are left with a sentimental story of a baby in a manger and some vague notion of love -- and that is all. Such folks will miss out on Christ altogether. Christmas will pass them by. And John implies they will face judgment.

John is reminding us of something absolutely crucial: *Christ comes into the lives of those who are ready for him, and the way to get ready for him is to repent and to change our ways.* Only those who desire a clean heart can receive him. Only those who long to be made whole can walk with him. If we want to be ready for the coming of Christ, then we must turn from our evil ways, reset our priorities and actually live as God's people in the world. That's what repentance is all about.

Those who hear John's song in the wilderness and are convicted by it cry out, *"What shall we do?"* John's answers them, *"Share your clothes and food with those who don't have any."* The tax collectors asked, *"What shall we do?"* John said, *"Be honest with folks; don't take any more money than is due you."* The soldiers asked, *"What shall we do?"* And John said, *"Don't use your positions of power to wrong others, and be satisfied with what you have."*

You and I also wonder what we have to do to get ready for Christ's coming. What shall we do, John? And he says something like this:

Stop being selfish and think of other persons. Be a better steward of all your affluence. Learn to live more modestly, and share what you have with people who have little. Use your imaginations and energies to make the human community a place of love and acceptance. Get rid of those habits and desires that prevent you from entering into the fullness of life. Live by Kingdom priorities! Turn around and live differently. Live what Jesus taught! Change your ways!

John is suggesting that there is more to preparing for the Lord's coming than cleaning up our house and putting up decorations and baking Christmas cookies. True preparation for Christmas has to do with getting our inner spiritual house in order and actually living by what Jesus taught. It has to do with straightening the crooked areas of our lives and removing the obstacles that prevent us from experiencing the life the Lord would have us live.

Perhaps you and I can use these days before Christmas, to examine ourselves to see just what it is that needs changing. What is out of alignment with God's will? What's crooked? What one bad attitude or habit can we work on eradicating or reforming? Is it our impatience with others? Our greed? That bitterness towards another that we refuse to let go of more out of habit than anything else? What new positive practice can we establish?

Thankfully, though, we are not responsible for making these kinds of changes solely in our own power. If it were up to us only - human nature being what it is, we could never change to any sufficient degree. But real change is possible as we surrender ourselves to the power and the rule of God. In fact, God promises to remake us as we give our lives over into his control.

There is a story of a business person who was selling a warehouse property. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed the windows, and strewn trash all over the place. As he showed a prospective buyer the property, he took pains to say that he would replace the broken windows, bring in a crew to correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage. The buyer said, *"Forget about the repairs. When I buy this place, I'm going to build something completely different. I don't want the building, I want the site."*

That's God's message to you and me! Compared with the renovation God has in mind, our efforts to improve our own lives are as trivial as sweeping a warehouse slated for the wrecking ball. When we become God's the old life is over. God makes all things new. All God wants is the site and the permission to build. All we have to do is give God the "property" and God will do the necessary "building."

Luke tells us there are many who are convicted by John's song. And John baptizes them in the River Jordan. They are confessing their sins and giving themselves over to another power. They are surrendering themselves to Lord. They are putting themselves into the hands of the Lord, saying, *"Here, I am Lord. Remake me in your image. I give you all that I am and all that I have. I want to live for you and your kingdom. Change my heart, O God."*

Can you hear John singing in the wilderness of your own life? Do you hear the prophet callin'? "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Let him help you straighten out the crooked areas of your life. Let him help you remove the obstacles that keep you from experiencing life in all its fullness. Repent and claim his forgiveness. The Lord is coming. Make ready your heart to receive him...

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight a highway for our God."