

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 18 September

Children's Talk: There's a Place for You

Talk about preparing: what does it mean to prepare?

How did you prepare for Church this morning? What would have happened if you had not prepared?

What other things do you prepare for? And what happens if you don't?

School

Tests

Going out

Building a road

A man named John prepared people for the Lord:

...the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord;

Make His paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough ways smooth;

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" (Luke 3:2-6)

If you knew that you were going to meet the Lord, what might you do? What needs to happen before you can have the Lord enter your life? Is it going to take hard work? Making mountains into flat places, valleys into roads.

Prepare the Way

A sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
18 September, 2022

John's mission in life was to prepare the way for the Lord. His father prophesied of him that he,

...will be called the prophet of the Highest;
For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76-79)

But why does the Lord even need someone to prepare the way? He's the Lord. Can't He just show up and deal with people as they are? We have this kind of thought a lot. Preparation is not the part of life that we most enjoy, but it is necessary. We cannot go straight to the finish line. Even in our relationship with the Lord there is a necessary time of preparation.

So why do we need that preparation? Well we think of the Lord's coming as a very innocent and peaceful time. How could you get more innocent and peaceful than the birth of an infant? Yet if we look to the prophecies of the Lord's coming it doesn't seem like such a nice thing after all. It will be a day of wrath; A day of destruction; A day of fear and anguish. That's why the Lord needed someone to prepare the way. It's not because *He* needs to have the way prepared, it's because we need to have the way prepared, lest His coming damage us. Listen to just a few of these prophecies of what that day will be like when the Lord comes into the world (The Day of the Lord refers to His coming):

Blow the trumpet in Zion,
And sound an alarm in My holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble;
For the day of the Lord is coming,
For it is at hand:
A day of darkness and gloominess,
A day of clouds and thick darkness. (Joel 2:1-2)

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!
For what good is the day of the Lord to you?
It will be darkness, and not light. (Amos 5:18)

Wail, for the day of the Lord is at hand!
It will come as destruction from the Almighty. (Isaiah 13:6)

Those aren't the prophecies that we usually associate with the Lord's coming into the world, which makes sense. These prophecies sound terrible and seem like they have nothing to do with the birth of the infant Jesus so many centuries ago. Yet there is something in these prophecies that we need to hear and it has to do with John and

the way that He prepared people for the Lord's presence. That idea of preparation is found in prophecies from the book of Malachi:

Behold, I send My messenger,
And he will prepare the way before Me.
...
But who can endure the day of His coming?
And who can stand when He appears?
For He is like a refiner's fire
And like launderers' soap.
He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver;
He will purify the sons of Levi,
And purge them as gold and silver,
That they may offer to the Lord
An offering in righteousness. (Malachi 3:1-3)

This is a great explanation for why the coming of the Lord is said to bring such terrible consequences, so terrible that without someone to prepare us we would be stricken with a curse. Who can endure the day of His coming? He is like a refiner's fire: He will purify and purge them like gold and silver. We are like gold or silver ore. We have the potential to be of great value, but we also have a lot of junk that needs to be removed before the value can shine. When the Lord comes into our lives He burns away the dross, which is pretty awesome; but we love that dross immensely, and that is what makes it not so awesome. That is what makes it in fact terrible. Imagine if the Lord came into your life and burned away every last one of your evils and flaws. He would burn away most of what makes you you. He would burn away so much of what you love. He would burn away your sense of ownership and self. You would be eradicated by it.

We can't go right to the Lord because there is a gulf that separates us. That gulf is not of His making but of our own: our selfishness and our attachment to our flaws pushes Him away and keeps Him at arm's length. Were we to have the Lord with us fully in an instant that gulf and the guilt and shame it would bring would destroy us. There is no way we could survive having to live with knowing how much less we are than the Lord, how evil we truly are. Even the best among us could not face how much better he could be.

The Lord's presence is a wonderful and innocent; but if we are not prepared that wonder and innocence would burn us like the power of the sun entering into our very bodies. That is why the Lord needed someone to go before Him to prepare the way and that is why we ourselves need to go through preparation before we experience the birth of the Lord in our own lives (cf. *True Christian Religion* §688).

This is not by the way, a bad thing. The point of this is not to make us feel ashamed or insignificant. It is simply a reality of spiritual life that preparation is required before we can fully experience the Lord's presence. Indeed the Lord is intimately present with each and every one of us.

Divine order requires that a person should prepare himself for the reception of God, and make himself a receptacle and dwelling-place into which God may enter and dwell as in His own temple. This a person must do as from himself, but still he must acknowledge that it is from God. He must acknowledge this because he does not feel God's presence and operation, although it is God

who in closest presence with man causes to function in him all the good of love and all the truth of faith. (*True Christian Religion* §105)

As we have said the preparation is not the fun part, and here we have part of the reason: while we are preparing, even though the Lord is present, we feel as if we are on our own, slaving away without help. Yet to have the Lord dwell within us, we do need to go through that preparation.

So how did John do this work of preparation? If we can discover what that work was we will be able to replicate it in our own lives and be prepared for when the Lord shows up for us. The heart of what John taught is repentance. His baptism was called a baptism of repentance. Nor was he just talking about a shift in mindset when he preached repentance. His words make it very clear that in order to repent we have to change our behaviors. The way he put it was that we must be like trees that bear good fruit.

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?"

He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you."

Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?"

So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:2-14)

Notice especially that when the people wanted to know what they could do he did not give them anything flashy or difficult: if you have extra clothes, give to those who are needy; if you have food give it to people who have none; if you're a tax collector, don't cheat people; if you're a soldier, don't abuse your power and be content. It isn't rocket science. Do the day to day things that need to be done, and do them with integrity. Another way of putting that is do all the boring stuff that doesn't get you any praise. Or do the mundane things. But above all *do something*. Get the ideas out of your head and put them into action. All the good ideas and pleasant hopes won't make an ounce of difference if you don't put them into action. It doesn't have to be world-changing or earth-shattering as long as it is something. That's the preparation that we do.

Preparing is not the fun part of life: We love playing beautiful music, not practicing the same song over and over again. We love the eating and sharing of the meal, not the slaving away over a hot stove. We love results; the labor not so much. Yet if we seek only the result and skip the preparation, we will not get the results we want. The same is true of the Lord: If we want to be able to experience the beautiful, tender, peaceful presence of the Lord then we also have to do the work of repentance. Otherwise the Lord's presence will be a terrible thing to behold; not

because the Lord will be angry about it, but rather because it will highlight how far short we've fallen of where we might be.

Think of the woman who thinks of herself as a good friend but chooses to sit at home watching TV rather than reaching out and connecting. Won't it sting when she realizes that her friends go elsewhere for support now? Think of the person who considers herself a peaceful and calm presence, but blows and pushes people away because she is unwilling to let go of the negative distractions in life. In that moment of anger when she realizes she has taken peace from those around her, won't there be pangs of sadness? Think of the man who feels immense love for his children but does not do much for them. He does not do the work of caring and providing for them. When the moment comes for him to look in their eyes, and where he had hoped to see love he instead sees disappointment, won't his guilt and shame crush him? Think of the child who wants more than anything to impress his father but does not work hard or study. Won't it hurt when he looks for praise but finds that he has let his dad down? These are all examples of how hard and painful it can be when we deeply desire something good but have not prepared to actually have it.

Repentance is messy and confusing and hard. It is hard to confront our own flaws and understand where we have fallen short and to try to start up that long slope of reform once again. But without repentance life would be even harder: we would never move past our flaws. When we have not prepared through repentance, those moments in which the Lord could have flooded our lives with joy would instead fill us with guilt and hurt. Those moments that could have been the birth of the Lord into our lives instead become something quite different.

When on the other hand we have done the preparation of repentance the Lord's presence is a holy and innocent one. When we have gone out of our way for friends, when we have chosen to look to the good, when we do show love for our families in concrete ways, when we do the hard work, then, when the opportunity arises, what a joy it will be! We will see and feel the love and presence of the Lord in ourselves and in those around us. We will be ready to have the Lord. We will be able to face the trials ahead. We will be able to look our own failures and flaws, and hell itself in the eye, and know that we can and shall overcome.