

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on November 28, 2021

JOHN THE BAPTIST: PREPARE THE WAY

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Matthew 3:3

Last Sunday we concluded our focus on the core stories of the Book of Genesis. During the next seven weeks, through the seasons of Advent and Christmas Tide, we will look at the core people and stories surrounding Jesus coming into the world.

The first figure associated with Jesus coming into the world is John the Baptist. Even though we find John in the New Testament, in many ways, he is an Old Testament character. He comes from the desert preaching the same message as many of the prophets: repent.

The main purpose of John the Baptist is to prepare the way for Jesus’s coming into the world. He serves as what I might call an advance man for Jesus. Several years ago, before a presidential visit to Israel, I heard an NPR interview of a man named Spencer Geissinger. Spencer had headed the Presidential Advance Team during the Bush administration. The focus of the interview was all the various tasks that go into making a presidential visit successful.

It is quite amazing all the things that must be taken into consideration. A large team of people spend weeks making the arrangements. There are a whole host of different issues that must be addressed.

One of the primary concerns is security. The Secret Service wants to insure the safety of the President. They have great input on how the President will travel and where the party will stay.

There are logistic people who must find suitable accommodations and refreshments for the large party that travels with the President.

Then there are the diplomatic people who want to make sure the President gets to meet and greet all the correct people.

Then there are the communications and messaging people who want to make sure the purpose of the trip is clearly communicated through speeches and choices of venue. Think of President Reagan at Normandy with the back drop of the beaches talking about the need for a strong alliance in 1984. The advance team had done a perfect job of matching venue and message.

The overall job of the advance team is to prepare the way for the President. The advance team is to make sure the message of the President is presented in the best possible way.

John the Baptist served as Jesus’ advance team. John came to prepare the way of the Lord. He said that **he was not the light but came to bear witness to the light.**

John's task was to make people ready to receive Jesus. John came to call people to repent in order to be prepared to greet the one who was coming after him.

In the Gospels, it is clear that John the Baptist needed humility. People came to him and asked if he was the Messiah. There were many men and women who were impressed by this figure who came in from the desert and called the people to change their lives. They saw his sincerity. They felt the power of his message. They were challenged by the force of his personality. This caused many to feel that John might just be the Messiah.

It must have been tempting for John to accept their accolades. This acclaim could easily have caused John to take on the role of Messiah for himself. Yet John resisted and said he was not the Messiah. He told them that another was coming who was greater, one whom he was not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals.

Remember sandals were composed simply of leather soles fastened by straps passing through the toes. The roads were unpaved. In dry weather the roads were dusty; in wet weather they were muddy. Removing these dirty sandals was the job of a slave. John claimed that he was not worthy of doing this job for the one that was coming. John was not concerned with his own position or place in history. His lack of pretension enabled him to help prepare the way for Jesus. His humility led him to always point to the one who was coming. John the Baptist never allowed himself to come between people and Jesus. He turned their attention away from himself and towards Christ.

John the Baptist could prepare the way for Jesus because he had integrity. We are told he came from the desert – which in part means he was an outsider. He was not part of the religious and political machine surrounding the temple. The people knew the religious authorities had been compromised by their subservience to Rome. They had made a deal to keep their positions by playing along with Roman occupation. John was not part of the establishment. He could be trusted to speak truth.

You and I are called, like John, to be advance men and women for Jesus. We are called to **Prepare the way of the Lord**. I believe that this text can be understood at both a corporate and a personal level

First a corporate question – Does the Church act as an advance team for Jesus?

The church is called to be the body of Christ; part of its purpose is to draw people to Jesus. Yet the Church is also an institution. Since the time of Constantine, the church has been an integral part of society. As an institution, the church has an interest in survival. In many congregations, survival becomes an end in itself. We are not immune from this.

There is nothing wrong with being concerned with the future of the Church. There is nothing evil with worrying about the institutional health of our congregation.

But,...but we need to remember that a primary mission of the Church is to be an advance team for Christ. The church must have the humility to point beyond itself to its Lord. The church is not an end in itself. Our calling is not to sell this congregation because of the social life it offers, or the music that is performed.

All too often both the leaders and the members of congregations see themselves as being the customers of the Church. They expect their congregation to serve them. That is a misreading of the gospel. We are all the workers in Christ's body. The customers, if you will, are out there. We are called to serve the world.

The Church must point beyond itself to Jesus. The purpose of our worship is to bring people into contact with God. Our education programs are to teach children and adults about Jesus. The goal of our common life and mission is to incarnate Jesus' love in the world. John the Baptist challenges us to work together to build our common life at Clarence Presbyterian that we might point more clearly to Christ.

This mission makes us ask ourselves two questions. The first, does the church show the humility of John the Baptist? One of the reasons that people have been turned off by the Church of Christ has been the stereotype of the Christian Church as being judgmental and having all the answers. Thus, it is important for us to cultivate institutional humility. We do not know it all but we point to one who is the truth.

Secondly, if we are to point to Jesus we must not be seen as part of the system. In the last fifty years churches of a variety of traditions have taken sides in the so-called culture wars. One of the reasons that young people have given for being turned off by the church is the political nature of many congregations. So many Christian bodies have lined up on one side or another of controversial political issues. Some have tried to be a player in the political process. In doing so many groups have been used by politicians. This focus on politics has taken the focus away from pointing to Jesus.

We must be reminded again and again that the church must point to one greater than us.

On the personal level, John the Baptist presents us, during the season of Advent, with an interesting challenge – does our celebration of Christmas point to Jesus?

The celebration of the holidays is meant to be a time when we remember a certain event or person. Yet I wonder what has become of Christmas. The month of December is often considered to be the most hectic of the year.

We run hither and yon seeking to buy the proper gift for each person that we suspect is going to give us a gift. The buying can often become a burden. During this season of the year many people do not so much enjoy shopping as endure it.

Every organization, club and group has a party at which people, who almost never socialize with each other at any other time of the year, are required to have a good time.

We put up decorations, trees and tinsel to add gaiety and color to the season.

Now I am not saying that any of these trimmings of the season are bad. I am not saying that we have to get rid of them. But I do ask, "Where is Jesus in our celebrations?"

How does the journey to the Galleria relate to Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem? How do office parties at Salvatore's connect with the manger in the stable at

the Inn with the no vacancy sign? What do strings of lights on houses have to do with the light of the world?

If someone from another planet saw our behavior during the month of December would they know what our celebrations were all about?

Covid cancelled most activities last year and will put a damper on many this year. That may not be a bad thing. It may help us refocus on what is truly important.

This year in our celebrations of Christmas may we find some focus on Jesus. May we take some special time to remember the birth of our Savior two thousand years ago.

Whether it is singing carols,
Or sending Christmas cards that tell of Jesus' birth rather than of Santa Claus,
Or sharing food and Christmas angels with the poor,
Or attending the Christmas Eve Service,
Or gathering to read the Christmas story as a family,

May we find a way to focus our celebrations on Christ.

As the writer Edward Hays recommends:

"Take time to be aware that in the very midst of our busy preparations for the celebration of Christ's birth in ancient Bethlehem, Christ is reborn in the Bethlehems of our homes and daily lives. Take time, slow down, be still, and be awake to the Divine Mystery that looks so common and so ordinary yet is wondrously present.

In several famous pulpits around the world there is inscribed these words facing the preacher, "Sir, We would see Jesus." I believe that this is the message that John the Baptist gives us. The world asks us in our life together as the church and in our celebration of Christmas, that Jesus can be seen.

We are not the light,
but we can bare witness to that light
which came into the world at Bethlehem.
We can be advance men and women for Jesus.

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord."