

Sermon: A Voice in the Wilderness
Scripture: Isaiah 40:3-5
Date: April 8, 2018
Preacher: Rev. Becky Smithey

As we said last week, we are going to be looking at some of the imagery from the song, *“These Are the Days of Elijah”* to help us understand the idea of renewal and how it is God can move on us. The imagery from this song is all Biblical, which is good, but unfortunately, it also means that it can be unfamiliar to many of us.

Today we are going to focus on *“Still we are a voice in the desert crying ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord’”*. There are two references in scripture on which this based. One is the prophecy the other is the fulfillment. The prophecy is from Isaiah 40:3 and the fulfillment is found in the gospels, for example, Matthew 3, which claims that John the Baptist was the fulfillment. In both, the idea is one of preparing the way for God, although in John the Baptist’s case it becomes clear that it is Jesus who he is preparing the way for. But I guess what we really need to understand if this is to be relevant to us, is what does it mean to prepare the way of the Lord? What does it mean to prepare the way for God?

We often pray that when we go and talk to people about the gospel that God will send his Holy Spirit ahead of us to prepare the way for us, so that people are receptive to the gospel. But what could it possibly mean for us to prepare the way for God? He is everywhere, he is omnipresent. Therefore where can we go that God is not, to prepare the way for Him? Of course, for John the Baptist, this was not really such a problem. Jesus arrived as God and as man—fully divine, fully human. John the Baptist’s mission was to prepare the way for Jesus. He was to prepare the people for Jesus’ mission. Gabriel tells us he is to do this by turning the people from their wickedness back to righteousness. When John begins his mission, he preaches a message of baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

This could be considered a little strange. The Jews already had a method for finding forgiveness of their sins. They should go to the temple and offer the prescribed sacrifices and they would be forgiven for their sins. But John said they shouldn’t go to the temple and make the sacrifices that had been prescribed, the way to forgiveness was through his baptism, having water sprinkled or poured on your head or by being immersed in a pool of water. Why? Why should John offer forgiveness outside the temple system? There are a number of reasons we are going to look at, but the first one we need to consider is that he was preparing the way for Jesus who offered forgiveness outside the temple system. He just forgave people. John’s baptism of repentance paved the way for Jesus’ message of repentance and forgiveness through Him.

But there were also other reasons for John’s Baptism. There were problems with the sacrificial system. Not so much in what it was, but in the way it had been abused. The idea behind the sacrifices was that when people realized they had sinned and were in violation of the law they could get back into a right relationship with God by repenting and offering the correct sacrifice. The sacrifice was a way of symbolically transferring their guilt and sins to an animal which was

then killed in their place. Or it could be viewed as an identification with the animal, so that the animal's death became your own death, a death to sin. This pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. However, while this may have been the ideal, the problems that arise with all symbols eventually arose. People forgot what the symbols stood for and thought that it was the action itself that was important.

Thus, the sacrificial system had come to be separated from the act of repentance. People thought they were ok with God, if they just performed the correct sacrifices. God didn't care whether they were sorry or whether they continued to commit the sins over and over again as long as they performed the correct sacrifices. John says "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*" John was telling the crowd that it didn't matter what kind of act they went through if they didn't actually repent then there was no forgiveness to offer. It didn't matter if they performed the right sacrifices, said the right prayers, even participated in John's baptism, if there was no repentance there was no forgiveness of sins. Repentance is not only being sorry for sin but turning away from sin and doing it no more.

But there was a second criticism in John's message. They were not only relying on performing actions to say they were ok, but relying on the fact that they were Jews and thinking that they were ok since they were children of Abraham no matter how they lived their lives. John told them that this was not acceptable to God, nor had it ever been. The record of the Old Testament is one long complaint after another about the way some of the Jews had been acting and how God was going to punish them for it. They would only find acceptance by God if they turned to him in repentance. This also paved the way for the message of Jesus which was that there was no Jew or Greek anymore and inclusion in the people of God was now on the basis of accepting Jesus rather than national identity.

So John prepared the way for Jesus by pointing out that the outward forms of religion were useless if there was no inner change. It was not a matter of observing the correct forms it was a matter of repentance.

In light of this message of John, the people started asking John what they should do. The answers that John gives are not really that surprising or innovative. They were not some startling new way of gaining acceptance from God. Mostly they were just common sense ways. Things that were obvious but which people needed to do. To be honest and only collect the taxes that people owe, rather than charging extra and pocketing the difference. To the soldiers he says be honest, don't accuse people falsely or try to extort money from them. None of these are particularly ground shaking. He was just telling people to live justly and do what was right. John's baptism was not a quick way out, a quick fix to get you to heaven and then you could live how you liked, or an easy way to avoid changing your life or a cheaper alternative to buying a sacrifice. No, it required a change in behavior. Jesus was the same. He accepted all, even notorious sinners but his way was not the easy way out, a way to gain God's approval without the change in lifestyle that would be required in the Jewish law. It required the same change. Jesus just insisted that God would accept them and help them change.

So we've seen how John prepared the way for Jesus, but what about us, how are we to prepare the way for Jesus? There could be two ways in which we could prepare the way for Jesus. First, we could prepare the way for His Second Coming. 2nd Peter mentions that we can hasten the coming of Jesus by bringing more and more people to Jesus. However, this is not the only way we could talk about preparing the way of the Lord. It could also be to prepare the way for Christ's coming in people's lives. So let's look again at the message of John and see how it is the message that we need to give people, to prepare for the arrival of God.

We need to remember that primarily John's message was one of repentance. It is about turning from sins and doing them no more. It is about an accepting God, who accepts all no matter what they have done in the past, but only when they repent. But it requires us to be honest about the message. Too often Christianity is presented in watered down version that just misses the point. This was not the case for John the Baptist. He emphasized the true nature of repentance as we have seen. He wasn't interested in outward conformity, in the observances of rituals, he was interested in a change in lifestyle. While some correctly see a welcoming God who will welcome them and give them a second chance to be what they were always intended to be, there are others who only see a cheap way into heaven. They know what God's standard is, they know what it is that God required, but they see Christianity as a loop hole, a way to avoid the requirements of God. They come to Christ and ask what is required, with the attitude that maybe this grace thing will have lower demands. You know, come to church once a week and give your tithe and you'll be ok. For extra credit and a couple of extra rooms on your mansion in heaven then you can optionally come to the Bible Study and/or Sunday School. But under no circumstances does it require you to change the rest of your life, or live the kind of life that God requires. It's the easy way out. Rather like the ones who came to John the Baptist to ask what it was that was required of them, expecting something like, sacrifice so many animals, go through so many ritual washing and baptisms and you'll be alright. John's response was essentially, ok, I'll tell you what you need to do, change your lifestyle and do what is right, meet God's requirements.

Sometimes, we forget that Jesus didn't come to lower the standard but rather he came to enable us to meet it. Christianity is not about avoiding the standard through Jesus, it is about Jesus enabling us to meet the standard. Yes, forgiveness for sinning and not meeting the standard is a crucial part of Christianity. We can be forgiven for the wrongs we have done, the sins we have committed and we need to be. But when it comes to the standards of God, it's not simply a matter of Jesus having done it so we don't have to. It is a matter of what Jesus has done enables us to meet the standard, not to avoid it. Now we are not going to be perfect. We will make mistakes, errors and sins and these can be forgiven but not bothering, not seeing the need to live a righteous lifestyle, well that can't be forgiven until it is repented of which requires us to see that it is a requirement.

This is what it means to make clear paths in the wilderness. It means two things. One, it means that we tell people what God's requirements are. If we are to prepare people to receive God, then we have to tell them how. It means doing what John the Baptist did calling people to

repentance. But it means doing this faithfully, not giving them an easy option or trying to ease them into Christianity with such tactics like, just say you're sorry and say this prayer without making clear the requirements of a change in lifestyle. This is tricky to get right, it is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin and it is not up to us to tell people what order God has to deal with their problems and sins. You can complain and moan all you like to no avail about some particular aspect of someone's behavior, yet when God lays his finger on that issue in a person's life, things suddenly start to happen. So I'm not out for a judgmental Christianity where we constantly criticize each other and point out all the flaws ignoring our own. Rather, I am talking about making the requirements of Christianity clear. It is about a change of lifestyle, it is not a quick fix, it's about living a righteous life. We need to make this clear when we present the Gospel.

The second thing we need to learn to prepare the way of the Lord, is that we need to live up to this. We need to live proper Christian lives, so that people can see Christ in us and see in us what it means to be a Christian.

So we get to the John the Baptist bit of "These are the days of Elijah."

If we are to see the Church revived and God's Kingdom to grow, then we need to follow the example of John the Baptist. The message that we present cannot be a diluted one. We need to make it clear that to be a Christian is to follow Christ, is to be righteous. God enables but unless there is a willingness on our part to change and be the kind of person God wants us to be then we are not a Christian no matter how many times we come to church, how many prayers we've prayed, how much we say we're sorry. It's not about saying we're sorry, it's about changing with God's help.