

“Prepare the Way”
Isaiah 40:1-11; 2Peter 3:8-15a;
Psalm 85:8-13; Mark 1:1-8

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Last week, we had a wonderful service where we put up a lot of the greenery, the poinsettias, and the Chrismons on the tree. We talked about how these different elements of our decoration point us to God in some way or other, point us to what God is about and what God is about to do. The decorations invite us to watch for God’s coming that we anticipate in advent.

They are a way we prepare, as well. There are things we do to make our lives ready. Oftentimes we think about the decorations as a way to make our lives ready for Christmas. We can do all kinds of planning. In fact, I know people who can get pretty detailed about their planning of exactly what needs to be done each day as we move toward Christmas. So we are people who are capable of preparing, of being able to move forward, of being ready for what’s coming.

We prepare for Christmas, and I bet there are a bunch of students who are preparing for something else right now. Full of preparation, and we know what that takes, as well—the studying and getting ready for finals. So we are a people capable of preparing.

What does it mean to prepare the way for Christ? In Isaiah it says to prepare the way, make straight the path. If that’s really what I have to do, I know exactly how to make a straight path. I know what to do. I know how to level it. I know how to build it. But it’s a metaphor, isn’t it? It’s inviting us to do more than that, something different.

When I first read through this passage, I thought I would have to look elsewhere to find how to do that. Then I realized that there were some things right before me that I should look at. What is Mark telling us about preparing the way?

First, there’s someone who is speaking out. The interesting thing about the one speaking out is that it’s John the Baptist, and he’s speaking out of the wilderness, not the seat of power. He wasn’t a scribe or a Pharisee. It wasn’t a temple edict coming down to tell the people how things should happen. It makes me wonder if Jesus were to come among us and we were to send somebody in advance, my expectation is that he probably wouldn’t send somebody here, at least if he did it in the same way.

John is an unexpected voice speaking to us out of the wilderness. It says that he wore camel hair. If he were this far north, maybe it would be more of a fur. But it would be pretty strange if I came wearing camel hair for my garb today. Sometimes I wonder if what God was doing through John, who came out of the wilderness wearing those rough clothes and basically living off the land, was trying to get our attention. The interesting thing about that today is that the unusual might not get our attention nearly as much because there are all kinds of unusual things around us all the time. There are a lot of ways that people are trying to get our attention.

What might be an unexpected thing for us to encounter today? I think one of the unexpected things we might encounter is silence. There are so many things going on, that it's so easy to ignore them. It's a little like those moments when my wife looks at me and says, "Norman, are you listening to me?" There are so many things to think about, but if I don't take the time, I won't hear what she says.

It's an unexpected thing to ask, in a way, to take time to be quiet that we might hear. So that's the very thing that's happening in this verse. We have John speaking to God's people. The announcement, the proclamation is coming from an unexpected place. I think it invites us to listen, even in unexpected places—perhaps in that unexpected place of silence in our lives.

So John does things that are a little unexpected, and then out of that unexpected comes a message. Mark tells us it's like what Isaiah said. It's the proclamation in the wilderness. It's laying the path straight. How does John the Baptist describe laying the path straight? He doesn't say, "Come to me and I'll lay your path straight." He says, "Come for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Baptism. Why? It's a real action. It's doing something. It's a ritual. It's a way of saying yes to what he's asking of us. And what is he asking of us?

If I were to preach facing the other direction I think you all would begin to wonder what I was doing. Why in the world would I speak to you and look away. That's what John is telling us. We're trying to speak to God when our relationship with God is one in which we've turned away. If we want that relationship to work, he's inviting us to turn around. If we're going to have a conversation, we really would rather have it face to face, not with my back turned, wouldn't we?

There are a couple of incredible things about what John is doing here as a messenger of God. The first incredible thing is that God thinks we might listen. It's a little shocking, but God has confidence that we can listen. Not only that we can listen, but that we can do something. We can mark a moment in our lives and say we're going to turn around. It's a little hard because when I face the other way, there's a pretty nice view. There's nothing wrong with looking that way some of the time. But it's wrong in relationship to what I'm doing. It's wrong in terms of the relationship we have right now. Sometimes I think I have a view and I don't want to change. Sometimes I think that view is pretty nice and why should I change. Or, I'm afraid to change. I'm afraid to look at what's behind me sometimes. And yet we're invited to turn around.

Why are we invited to turn around? Because as nice and as beautiful as the view in that direction is, it's not all there is. We are invited to turn to something that is incredibly real that would come into our lives when we turn toward it. If you want to give me a gift and I turn away, it's pretty hard for me to receive it. It's awkward. And who wants to give a gift to somebody's back?

God wants to give us a gift. The incredible thing is that all we have to do is turn around, turn toward God. We may not be able to get rid of all our junk. We may not be able to change our path completely, but if we can make an opening in it, God is willing to come in. Isn't that what Christmas about? God is willing to come into our lives and give us an incredible gift: a gift of grace, a gift of new life, a gift of how we might live our life, and a gift of everlasting life. It might be worth turning around for that.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, it is hard for us at times to turn around, to hear you as you speak into our lives in unexpected ways with words that sometimes we only hear in a negative way, that seem to point out how bad we are. And yet, you're inviting us to do what we can do: to turn to you, to allow you to work in and through and with us. You are willing to come, to enter into our lives, to offer us grace, to give us a gift of new life, to show us the way to live now and forever. Thank you. Help us turn to you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.