

Straightening out Christmas

Luke 3:1-6

Prepare the Way of the Lord

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Every year I marvel at the amount of energy we put into Christmas. Not just the church, but most people in our society are knocking themselves out right now. Why is that? What are we really hoping will happen to us in the next two weeks?

*** I am continuing in a series of Advent sermons on John the Baptist. Today we come to the beginning of his ministry. Notice that before the gospel writer Luke introduces John's ministry, he first gives us a list of names:

the Roman Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea (We'll meet him again in a few months), Herod the ruler of Galilee and his brother Philip who ruled the region East of the Jordan River, Lysanias who was a tetrarch responsible for commerce on Rome's behalf, and finally Annas and Caiaphas who were the high priests. This is list of the most powerful men in society at this time. It includes political leadership, economic leadership and religious leadership. So isn't it striking that the very next words Luke writes are, "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness."?

When the word of God came in biblical times, it was usually through people who had little power or influence, but who had learned to listened to God. It came to people like John the Baptist who could rekindle our great dreams for life because he found them out in the wilderness. And thus, history has proven that it was John the Baptist who was truly great. Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Nations have great men and women only in spite of themselves. In fact, nations direct all their efforts to not having them. Thus great people must have, in order to exist, a force of attack greater than the force of resistance developed by their society."

Society has always encouraged mediocrity rather than greatness. That is because society cannot give us dreams. It gives us only plans: political plans, economic plans, religious plans. These plans become well worn over the years and they lead us only to repeat the mistakes of the past. But dreams, great dreams, are the things that prophets brings us. Today we have far too many plans and not nearly enough dreams.

It had been 400 years since Israel had heard God's word. For centuries the people had been waiting, and searching and dreaming for his word. They wouldn't settle for more political words. They wouldn't settle for more economic words. They wouldn't settle even for religious words. All those words were little more than plans for dwelling in the darkness. They yearned for great dreams that could only come from one inspired with the word of God.

Today, you and I are living in a similar time. In spite of all the talk about religion and spirituality waning in our secular society, the statistics prove just the opposite. According to the Gallup polls 98% of Americans pray, which is particularly significant since only 96% of us believe in God. (I don't know who the other two percent are praying to.) 94% of us plan to go to heaven when we die and 93% of us own Bibles. Thomas Nelson Publishers, just one of the Bible producers, sells over 8 million Bibles a year. Religious books which were once relegated to small Christian bookstores are now promoted by the largest bookstore chains. All the news magazines regularly include religious news as cover stories. Last week's New York Times Magazine was completely devoted to religion. Even television is giving religion a more popular face with shows like Seventh Heaven, Touched by an Angel, Nothing Sacred. Spirituality is as cool as it gets today.

Let us be careful, however, to avoid the conclusion that we are on the brink of revival here. A closer look at these statistics reveals some interesting insights. Although 93% of us own Bibles, over half of us cannot recite the names of the four gospels or name five of the ten commandments. 60% of us do not attend

worship. 61% of us do not believe in the resurrection of the body. And my favorite statistic, 10% of us think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife! (Statistics quoted in New York Times Magazine, December 7, 1997, pp. 60-61) So in spite of our current infatuation with spirituality, people are not reading the Bible, embracing orthodox doctrine, obeying biblical standards, or coming to worship.

No, what is in style is not hearing the word of God, but yearning for it. Atheism is clearly out. No one really argues about whether or not God exists anymore. In its place is not biblical faith, but a kinder, gentler, seeking agnosticism that dreams of finding God. So many times someone has come to talk to me about their search for God, and I find that over the years the blocks to finding God have changed. It used to be that the seeker's faith was prevented by intellectual doubts. But now people are prevented from believing more by their despair.

The younger they are the truer this is. They hope for little. They expect less. They expect little from politics about which it is stylish to be cynical, from the economy that hasn't made their parents happy, from organized religion that is preoccupied with little issues. They yearn to find a compelling dream to which they can commit themselves. They yearn even for God, but they just have too much despair about society and about themselves. So instead they settle for little hopes, like all the generations before them.

I think that is why every year we knock ourselves out at Christmas. Despairing of making sense of our world or even our own lives, we travel to visit family that we think may have changed since last year. We buy a few more presents. We go to a few more parties. Yearning to hear a word from God, we settle for Muzak versions of Silent Night in the malls. It won't work for us. It never has. It never will.

If ever there was a relevant moment to hear John the Baptist, it is today. People are searching, and they will come to anyone who has an authentic word from God. As John began to speak God's word to people, we are told that great crowds developed. It reminded them of the prophecy of Isaiah that someday one would come who would be, "The voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

The wilderness in the Bible is always seen as the antithesis of society. It is the barren place where people have to go to hear God's word because there is just too much noise in society that drowns out God's voice. We know that John spent a lot of time in the wilderness, and that is why he knew about God's word. If you really want to hear the word of God, you too have to withdraw from the noise. That is why we keep inviting you to worship. Here you can hear sounds the busy world doesn't make. As your hurried life is calmed, at last you are prepared to hear the still small voice of God's word.

At our home we have been busy with preparations for Christmas. The tree is up. The house is decorated. The recording of the Messiah has been playing non-stop. But the most important preparation is always when our little family sits around the Advent Wreath. Week after week as we light the candles and read the lessons, we remind ourselves that a Savior is coming. We remember that we have to prepare the way. We have to make his paths straight. The valleys have to be filled in. The mountains have to be made low. The crooked have to be made straight. The rough ways made smooth. Just as Isaiah and John the Baptist counsel us.

Remember that Luke recorded these words after a long list of royal names. Whenever a king was going to enter a city, the people who lived there would build a special entrance that was always straight and smooth. One of the most exciting archeological digs going on in Israel is in Beit Shean which is uncovering a great Roman City. If you go there today you can see the main entrance into the city which is a wide, straight, even road, with magnificent columns on either side. That city is located at the juncture of the Jezreel and Jericho valleys. John the Baptist must have been by it all the time. Anyone traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would have seen it. Everyone knew that a long straight road was what you made when a king was coming.

Well a king is coming. And his name is Jesus Christ. That is what Christmas is about, and you have prepared the way for his arrival into your life. But John was not telling us to start doing road repair. He was telling us to repair the road into our hearts. He was telling us that we have to hope again.

The crookedness that needs straightening out is your own soul that has been bent and turned by too many

false hopes. The only way to get your soul straightened out is to turn it toward the coming Savior. A vague search for God isn't going to do it. Anybody can search. What our society desperately needs are people who have found God. The only way to do that is to confess your need for him. Don't overlook your fears, hurts, or even your despair. Don't cover them up with a few fleeting moments of holiday. Confessing your need for a Savior is the best preparation you can make.

O Coming Savior, give us the courage to remain silent long enough to confront the truth about our need for salvation, more salvation than we know, until at last you have made our crooked souls straight. Amen.