

“Prepare the Way for the Lord”

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mark 1:2-3).

My youngest daughter has been applying to colleges lately and as we’ve navigated this process it’s clear that preparation is everything. Test scores and grades, essays and personal recommendations; all are factored into the application process and the more selective the school, the more these things matter. This is, of course, to be expected. Colleges want the best people they can get and past performance is one of the ways to build a quality student body. That’s the way the world works. We are judged every day by what we do and the harder we work and the better we perform, the greater our value in the world and the sweeter our rewards will be.

This is the world in which we live and it’s also the world in which John preached. In today’s Gospel reading, Mark introduces us to this strange character in the wilderness. He came just as the prophets had proclaimed and John’s role in God’s story of salvation was to announce the coming of God’s Kingdom; to tell everyone to get ready for the arrival of God’s promised Messiah. His job was to prepare the way of the Lord, but this message of preparation was not an encouragement to work harder or to improve performance. He didn’t tell the people who flocked to the wilderness to get busy or do better. John’s message was simple: Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sin!

John’s Advent message was not motivational in any way, in fact it was destructive. John preached a word of rebuke. He came to hold up the Word of God and to show the people how their lives and their hearts were far from God. He came to pronounce judgment. In a very important way, John came to destroy the way of the world and in its place to proclaim the way of the Lord.

Over the last few months, road crews have been working on the new Superior street roundabout and if you’ve paid attention to this construction site, you’ve noticed that the first thing they did when they started the project was to completely rip out the old road. Nothing was left! Not one section of concrete remained and the pieces of equipment they used to accomplish this work were powerful and violent. They scraped, they pummeled, they crushed and they completely demolished the old road before the new road could be built.

And this is *exactly* the job of the John the Baptist and this is *precisely* the purpose of Advent. Along with Lent, Advent is one of two penitential seasons in the church year. It’s a time when God’s people are called to repentance. When God’s Law is unleashed and through its proclamation, the human nature and the way of the world are destroyed. And we hate it! The author Steven Paulson comments on this very thing when he writes that, “The deepest desire of sinners...is to be righteous in the self by the law.”¹ By nature, we don’t want to hear the truth that we are helpless. By nature, we don’t really believe that our hearts are all that bad and we would much rather skip Advent and jump right to Christmas peace and silent nights and songs of joy than hear about the destruction of the way we know and love...but God loves us too much to leave us in our way.

¹ Paulson, S. (2013), *Lutheran Theology*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, p. 147.

So John's job as the Advent preacher in the wilderness and my job as the Advent preacher at Emmanuel is to tell you that your works are worthless, that your past performance means nothing, that anything in this life that you have done for validation or held onto for hope is merely an example of the very idolatry that God condemns in the First Commandment when He says. "You shall have no other God before me." And this word of Law, this message of judgment, this declaration of destruction is not meant for the unbelieving masses outside of these walls...it's meant for you; it's meant for us! And it is absolutely the truth.

Exemplary test scores and good grades, character references and essays don't matter in God's economy. But not only that, we can also add to this list things like our knowledge of the Bible and our church attendance, our faithful stewardship and even our love for our families. The point is that nothing we have ever done or will ever do contributes to our salvation. We stand before God completely bankrupt with nothing to offer Him except for our sin and once this Advent message has cornered us; once this Word of God has destroyed our way, then the way of the Lord can be established.

You see John's job and the job of every Christian preacher is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. This is always God's work and this is always God's way. He destroys the sinful heart with the truth of His Word so that through His Word He can create a new, righteous heart. He kills the old man so that a new man can be born. This work of God begins in our Baptism and as long as we live in our sinful flesh it never ends. Daily in His Word, He calls us to repent. Daily, in His Word, He kills our desire to be justified in ourselves. And daily, He recreates us and raises us to newness of life and just as He brought light into the world by His Word, He also brings life and salvation to our dead souls and He does it with this Word: "You are forgiven."

Paulson writes, "Christ did not die for us because we rid ourselves of sin; he died for sin because we could not be rid of it and did not even know that sin was not all that bad."² God didn't wait for us to come to Him. He didn't look to see how well we did on some cosmic placement test or compare our resume to the other sinners around us or even take a chance that we might have a spark of good in us. As His Word says, God demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were yet sinners – haters of God and His sworn enemies – Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). *This* is the way of the Lord that John came to proclaim.

The message of Advent is not that we should get better or get busy, this is not a time to show God how qualified we are for the kingdom. Instead, Advent calls us to despair of our efforts and turn from our past performance and to drop at foot of the cross of Jesus Christ where everything has been done for us; or, in the words of the prophet, where "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." And there on the cross of Jesus, our burden is carried, our sin is punished, comfort is given, salvation is found and we receive the righteousness of Christ. You are free. You are forgiven. And this is the way of the Lord. Amen.

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² Paulson, S. (2013), *Lutheran Theology*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, p. 145.