

“Prepare the Way of the Lord”

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8, John 1:6-9 & 19-28

Pastor James York

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The prophet Isaiah proclaims, prepare the way of the Lord. **Isaiah 40:1-11 NLT** “**Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her sad days are gone and her sins are pardoned. Yes, the Lord has punished her twice over for all her sins.” Listen! It’s the voice of someone shouting, “Clear the way through the wilderness for the Lord! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The Lord has spoken!” A voice said, “Shout!” I asked, “What should I shout?” “Shout that people are like the grass. Their beauty fades as quickly as the flowers in a field. The grass withers and the flowers fade beneath the breath of the Lord. And so it is with people. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.” O Zion, messenger of good news, shout from the mountaintops! Shout it louder, O Jerusalem. Shout, and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah, “Your God is coming!” Yes, the Sovereign Lord is coming in power. God will rule with a powerful arm. See, God brings God’s reward with God as God comes. God will feed God’s flock like a shepherd. God will carry the lambs in God’s arms, holding them close to God’s heart. God will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.”**

Scripture is the words of people who experienced God and were inspired by God. However, God is beyond words; so, anyone’s attempt to put the glory of God into words falls woefully short. God’s spectacular creation and gracious redemption of the world resonates with each person in a unique way. Today, we have three accounts of a particular loving action of God. When you put them together, we get a message that resonates with everyone.

The prophet Isaiah foresaw John preparing the way for Jesus. In the midst of despair, chaos, ugliness, and struggle, Isaiah had hope in God; a confident expectancy of the fulfillment of God’s promise to bless all people. During a time of great fear, Isaiah urges everyone to not be afraid for God’s word, blessings, and love stand forever. God is a shepherd, caring for each of us, providing all our needs, preserving our love, joys, and goodness for eternity. God is our good shepherd who carries us when we are struggling. God holds us close to God’s heart. We will enjoy God’s reward and glory. Envisioning Jesus coming and the Kingdom of God provides comfort. Isaiah’s John is compassionate, finds us, heals us, and delivers us. Isaiah’s John is like a loving mother, like Mother Teresa.

Mark proclaims, prepare the way of the Lord. **Mark 1:1-8 NRSV** “**The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make God’s paths straight,’” John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. John proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

Mark resonates with those who strive to live out their faith. Mark describes John as blunt, wild, and radical. Confess your sins. Repent, turn away from fear, hate, and that which diminishes life, turn towards love and all that nourishes life. Mark’s focus is on transformation and being filled with the Holy Spirit who is a mighty wind, fire, and force that shakes us up, turns us around, and invigorates us with joyful, loving, abundant life. Mark’s John is feisty and expects people to actively partner with God in changing their lives and changing the world. Mark’s John is like a charismatic, convicting, pastor who proclaims personal and social change, like Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King Junior.

John proclaims, prepare the way of the Lord. **John 1:6-9 & 19-28 NRSV** “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” John confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked John, “What then? Are you Elijah?” John said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” John answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked John, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.”

John resonates with two opposite groups of people. Those who are unaware of God, yet experience God in wonder, beauty, goodness, love, art, music, a fine meal, in the myriad of forms of light. Some of them are unaware that God is light, that God’s light is drawing them to God’s grace, that will complete their life. John also resonates with seekers and all who are searching. God is with everyone, all the time, yet sometimes one is unable to perceive God. John’s Jesus is the light of the world that in time will enlighten everyone. Ultimately every person will be illumined, given the gift of belief, so they can celebrate the coming radiance of God’s kingdom. John’s Jesus is a patient, sustaining, drawing, loving light that is welcoming everyone home to God’s luminous aura. John’s John is like a patient guide that lets one explore every option always inviting the explorer to discover the way, the truth and the life, like a good friend, a gentle praying grandmother, a listening spiritual director.

At the other end of the spectrum, John also resonates with the religious whose lives have become dry, hard, judgmental by their focus on rules, tradition and being overly skeptical of anything new. John is addressing, not Mark’s religious who are actively striving to grow in love, rather the religious who are stuck, focused on the past, joyless and unable to accept that God often works in unexpected ways outside of the church. John’s John answers their questions and urges them to open their minds to make room for Jesus, to blend their thoughts with their feelings, to let grace, joy and compassion move them beyond doctrine to a renewed life that renews others. John’s John penetrates one’s mind with answers and enables one’s heart to love. John’s John is like the angels that transformed Ebenezer Scrooge, like the Whos that transformed the Grinch.

There is something for everyone. Today and every moment of your changing life, God is calling you and empowering you with God’s Spirit. Isaiah, Mark, and John all use the metaphor of a path. God is always with us. God loves us with steadfast everlasting love. Life is a journey on a path. Fear, hate, suffering, darkness has made the path arduous full of twist and turns, mountains and valleys, sheer cliffs, barren deserts and treacherous with every step. We are to partner with Jesus in making our path and the paths of others straight and level.

Jesus is good news for all people. Scripture says, “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to John.” All the people of Jerusalem. All the priests in the temple. All the bureaucrats and the tax collectors. All the folks struggling to make ends meet and to scratch together enough to pay their taxes. All the folks on the unemployment rolls and all the folks worried they will be let go in the next round of lay-offs. All the criminals and scoundrels. All the elite and comfortable. All the brokenhearted and disillusioned. All the tired and overwhelmed. All the depressed and sick. All the intellectuals and feelers.

The people of Jerusalem weren’t much different from you and me. They were disillusioned by their government, suspicious of their institutions, concerned about dwindling Temple attendance, and worried about their future. Why would they respond so enthusiastically to John’s call to prepare the way of the Lord?

Perhaps it’s because they felt, deep in their bones, that something wonderful was about to happen, and if they didn’t prepare, they’d miss it. God was about to redeem the cosmos. God was about to mend a loving relationship with every person. Steadfast love and faithfulness will soon meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Great joy will be enjoyed by all people. So, the people were drawn out into the Jordan with John where they helped each other prepare the way of the Lord.

I heard a story recently about a priest in Peralta, Costa Rica, who could afford to take only one seminary course at a time. Because his commute was four hours one way, he studied his one textbook backwards and forwards, a book by Rene Padilla, entitled, *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation*. He came to know that book very well. When he began serving a congregation of 20 in the town of Peralta, the young priest taught the people what this book said about living the Christian faith. The question that the young pastor posed to his little church was, “What would it look like for the kingdom of God to come to our neighborhood?” The people in that tiny church thought hard. They prayed, and they talked to their neighbors. They decided that the most obvious sign of the kingdom of God in their neighborhood would be a functional sewerage system. You see, they discovered that a lack of a proper sewerage system caused a variety of illnesses and death in their town. So, house by house, this church dug and installed septic fields for each of Peralta’s 4,400 households. It took two years. Do the math. That works out to 183 septic fields a month, or six a day – for two years! Twenty people couldn’t possibly do that. How do you think they pulled that off? You guessed it! The town learned what the church was doing, and they joined in the project. So, it wasn’t just the church that dug all those systems. It was “all of Peralta” – a bit like “all of Jerusalem.” They dug those septic systems by hand. No bulldozers. No backhoes. You could say they were digging septic systems. You could also say they were making a straight path for the coming of the Lord. That’s what the kingdom of God looks like in Peralta, Costa Rica. That’s what preparing the way of the Lord looks like. That’s what Advent looks like.

There are signs of Advent all around us. There are a multitude of people who are serving to prepare the way of the Lord.

In this silence identify ways you will personally prepare the way of the Lord? In this silence ponder what the Kingdom of God looks like in your personal life?

How should we as a congregation prepare the way of the Lord? What would it look like for the kingdom of God to come to our neighborhood? Session believes it is serving together doing Hands-On Mission and inviting others to join us in doing Hands-On Mission. One of our latest endeavors is partnering with North Metro Flex Academy. We will be providing meals for 10 children who would otherwise go hungry on the weekends. We need someone to visit the school on Fridays and discreetly hide the meals in their backpacks. We need servants to read to students. Talk to Lisa Diez to get involved. Take a look at all the ways we have already prepared the way of the Lord in the Hands-On Mission binder in the gather space. Get involved in future missions. Invite guests to serve with you. Together we will transform our community and in so doing bring more of the Kingdom of God to the world and to our life. Is there something we have not yet done that you want to do, then talk to Lisa Diez for this family of faith is eager to empower all of us in preparing the way of the Lord. In this silence identify ways you will serve with others. Together let us prepare the way of the Lord.
Amen