

Luke 3:1-6

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” ’

“Prepare.” ‘Tis the season for preparing. Some of us have been checking car antifreeze, moving plants indoors, and taking stock of snow shovels and portable heaters – all in order to prepare for the arrival of winter’s weather.

“Prepare.” We’ve purchased the cards, run off the address labels, and procured the stamps, as we prepare to mail out our Christmas cards. We’ve put electric candles in windows, strings of lights on trees, wreaths on the front doors, and a nativity set on display – all to prepare for the coming of Christmas.

“Prepare.” My wife and, to a far lesser degree, yours truly have been preparing gift lists and shopping excursions, our spending limits and her excuses for breaking them – all to prepare for the great “rippin’ and tearin’” of Christmas morn.

“Prepare.” Some of you have purchased the tickets for the trip, wrapped the packages for shipping, or ordered online the goodies or surprises – all to prepare for the coming holidays with friends and loved ones.

“Prepare.” ‘Tis the season for preparing. And I have to tell you, I was feeling fairly good about my preparing this year...until I heard the words of John the baptizer, “Prepare the way...of the Lord!” Whoa... I’ve been busy preparing house and auto for the way of winter, the home for the way of holiday, the cards for the way of the mail, and the gifts for the ways of opening. But how, when, and where have I been preparing the way for the Lord to come...into my world or community – for the Lord to come...into my bustling realm of errands and get-togethers – for the Lord to come...into this world that so easily redecorates a holy day of fearsome awe into a

holiday of exhausting fun? In what's been occupying your energies and preoccupying your thoughts, have you been preparing the way of the Lord?

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,” scripture declares. Do you ever feel, however, like we've tried to take a *detour* around that kind of preparing? Do you feel kind of *sidetracked* when it comes to making a straight way for the Lord to come even into loved ones' lives? Sometimes we find ourselves on a different course all together. With all that I've been preparing, have I been preparing the way of the Lord...much at all?

Luke's gospel won't let us off the hook of having to reckon with the way of the Lord. Luke's gospel tells us that the way of the Lord's coming is made not just into people's hearts or sentiments, but also and foremost into our world. “The fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor” and Herod was a ruler, and brother Philip and Lysanias rulers of regions that sound like diseases and a place in Texas, and during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...” To Luke's contemporaries that's the real world and their real times. It's the real world of the movers and shakers, the real times of the power-brokers and the history-makers, the real turf of the competing forces, political and economic – that's where “the word of God came to John,” and where the way of the Lord is being made. We can't just look inside ourselves at some point and try to feel “spiritual”; we've got to be looking outside ourselves and into the world of all those intimidating powers and interminable problems, in order to prepare the way of the Lord. For God is not going to be left out, pushed out, or put out of the world, so Luke promises! God is going to find and make a way to come into real lives and in real time – not into the fleeting moments or sentiments – but into the real lives and times of people...who both fear and yet need the coming of the Lord.

In the first year of President Joseph Biden, when Northam is Governor of Virginia and Stoney the mayor of Richmond, during the high priesthood of Eaton and Humphrey, the Word of God comes...to you and me? “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” And suddenly the Gospel puts the brakes on our holiday planning, and makes us take a turn into that intimidating region of life that we try to avoid because of its stark realities and disquieting difficulties. “The word of God came to John...*in the wilderness*.” God's way is discovered not in the decorated malls of shopping or in the marbled halls of power, is it? God's way is heralded from the fringes, from the wilderness. And when you think of it, John the baptizer, Mary, and even the baby Jesus are all found on the fringes of a busy, self-absorbed world.

The word of God came to a fellow on the fringe... Come to think of it, isn't that what happens with our Advent devotions? The Advent Word of God comes to us on the fringes of a busy day. We often think those devotional readings should be more front-and-center; but maybe their peculiar power is that these words of God come to the fringes of our life and beckon us to look at life and God from such a different place and point of view.

I love this description of John the Baptist. A New Testament scholar describes John's presence as "divine wisdom from the lunatic fringe!"¹ "Divine wisdom from the lunatic fringe," that describes so well how many people experienced John, who was so different, so "out there," so nonconformist. You know, our sanity in a world bent on driving us crazy, confusing our mind, and numbing our nerve – our sanity depends on divine wisdom from the lunatic fringe, on the Word of God calling to us from the fringes of life where things are free to be different; and on the Spirit of God taking us to the fringes, the edge, where the envelope of our lives can be pushed...

"Prepare the way of the Lord," and God's people are drawn first to those on the fringe. That's why you've been helping a Christmas Mother in her giving, a local food pantry coalition in its feeding, and friends in their care of the homeless; and why you have other efforts and causes that you're supporting during this holy season. The way of the Lord is first experienced as a way to meet and remember those on the fringe, those in the tough wilderness of life. God comes to us by first taking us to the edge... And there you will see life, God, and yourself differently, anew, and real-ly. There you and I claim *a new edge* to our life. The gospel word for that new edge is *repentance*.

"Prepare the way of the Lord." Word of God coming to the fringes of my day. Spirit of God taking me to the fringes of my world. Repentance – living with a new *edge* to my thinking and my doing. And then the forgiveness of sins... Preparing the way for the Lord to come into this world comes down to proclaiming, baptizing, and enacting the forgiveness of sins. For that's the way God has chosen to enter our world: in the forgiveness of sins.

Whom do you need to forgive? That could be the best gift and the best giving... Whom do you need to forgive? Forgiveness is the way of God. It's taken me a long time, maybe too long, to finally learn that forgiveness is something that is just beyond this world. Invariably, the world botches, distorts, and denies forgiveness. That's why forgiveness always has to invade the world...through someone like you. Forgiveness

1. Daniel B. Clendenin, Ph.D. in *The Journey with Jesus: An Invitation to the Ancient Story* © 2009.

is beyond us; and so forgiveness is of God. And when people forgive, instead of getting even or rationalizing or blaming – when people forgive... And when people realize that they are forgiven – not excused, told it didn't matter, or let off, but forgiven... When people forgive and know they are forgiven – well, the servants of God have prepared the way for the Lord to invade with what this world can neither wield nor ever subvert – grace, the love of God so utterly, terribly, terrifically, and “finally!” given.

“Prepare the way of the Lord.” Word of God coming to the fringes of my life. Spirit of God taking me to the fringes of my world. Repentance – living with a new edge to my thinking and my doing. And forgiveness – beyond our world, only from God, but through you invading the world for the ones who need the way for the Lord to come and make things so awfully and awesomely new. What a way to go...out there, and what a way to be so... “out there”!

Next week, we're with John the baptizer again. This “Grinch” who looks like he'd steal Christmas ends up saving the Day of the Lord for you and me. I hope you'll still be with us on this Advent journey: a holy way in these holy days.