

Tis 3 weeks til Christmas, and all through the house, every creature is stirring, we must prepare for Clause!

Company is coming, of this we are sure; company is coming, let the stocking be hung, by the chimney or over there. Trim the tree, wrap the presents, write the cards, bake the cookies, buy the groceries, our list has no end! We can't take a breather; Christmas preparation is our annual obligation.

I'll pause the verse now for a change in direction; the sermon that is easy to preach is the sermon that scolds us for getting so caught up in our Christmas activities that we lose sight of what it's all about; “keep Christ in Christmas!” is the preacher's plea with a wagging finger, and at the end of the service, the preacher can feel that she really let them have it; and, the congregation can feel that they deserved to get it; but, at the end of it all, nothing has changed. The status quo remains, and our Christmas preparation is incomplete.

So if a simple Christmas appeals to you; have a simple Christmas; if a complex Christmas calls to you; have a complex Christmas; how we celebrate isn't the issue; the issue is the word of the prophet: Complete your Christmas preparation; “Prepare the way of the Lord!”

1. A Word from the Wild

John the Baptist is that odd guest at our Christmas celebration who says the thing that we were all thinking but were too uncomfortable to say. He speaks truth. He's raw; direct; uncompromising. He proclaims a word from the wild.

We prefer a word from a more civilized locale; the kind of locale Luke describes at the beginning of chapter 3: *Luke 3:1–2 (NRSV) In 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

Luke describes the political and religious order of early first century Israel; he speaks of the structures that we rely on for a sense of order and meaning in our lives. This is how we make it all make sense; but, look again. Luke is actually showing us a world that was about to come apart.

Tiberius was a tyrant; as far as Israel was concerned, he was the new Pharaoh who had to be overthrown for Israel to once again be the Promised Land. Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias were weak corrupt puppets of Rome who barely managed to maintain their position by oppressing the people.

The political picture Luke shows us is a powder keg about to explode; by the time he writes, the revolution has occurred and none of these leaders are in power. The religious picture is chaos; you could only have one high priest at a time, but Luke lists both Annas and Caiaphas as leaders of a priesthood that was the fruit of payoffs and power plays. By the time Luke writes, this religious structure has literally gone up in flames.

The civilized world wasn't so civilized after all; its civility was a sham, a front that perpetuated itself by concealing the truth. At all costs, even the cost of the life of a man like John or his cousin Jesus, the truth could not be told!

John isn't a part of any of that. He speaks a word from the wild; he offers us an invitation to interpret the chaos and confusion in our lives and our world in a different way, a hopeful way; he invites us to hear our struggles and the strains in our world; all of those things that keep us awake at night; all of those problems that make the front page; he invites us to hear all of them as God's invitation: *Luke 3:4–6 (NRSV) 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*

John's word from the wild is a foreshadowing of the gospel, and it drew people out into the wilderness; it drew them to the Jordan to be baptized; it drew them with the possibility that there was a way from the life they knew to the salvation God promised.

Our Christmas preparation begins with listening for the word of the Lord. God is speaking; we have valleys to fill and mountains to make low; we have the crooked to make straight, rough ways to make smooth, and we long for a world when “*all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*”

This word from the wild won't come when we expect it or from whom we expect it. The word comes to us from the outside; it rises up from below; it is a gift that “the least of these” offer to the rest of us.

Mr. Rogers offers us a case in point: “There was a story going around about the Special Olympics. For the hundred-yard dash, there were nine contestants, all of them so-called physically or mentally disabled. All nine of them assembled at the starting line and, at the sound of the gun, they took off. But one little boy didn't get very far. He stumbled and fell and hurt his knee and began to cry. The other eight children heard the boy crying. They slowed down, turned around, and ran back to him--every one of them ran back to him. The little boy got up, and he and the rest of the runners linked their arms together and joyfully walked to the finish line. They all finished the race at the same time. And when they did, everyone in the stadium stood up and clapped and whistled and cheered for a long, long time. And you know why? Because deep down we know that what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win, too, even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and then.”
— [Fred Rogers](#)

Christmas is coming; it's time to prepare. One word describes the One who is coming; one word describes the new world he brings; one word. Get ready to hear it -wild!

2. Christmas Preparation

The word of the Lord hadn't been heard in several hundred years before John; that's hard for us to imagine. As Christians, we live post-Pentecost; we live post-Reformation - when the word of God that we cherish as the Bible was put into all of our hands in our language and by the power of the Holy Spirit is written on our hearts.

We live in the age of the New Testament, but John marks the close of the Old Testament, when the word of the Lord was rare. It was unexpected. It was wild; a disruption of our standard operating procedure.

[John] Luke 3:3 (NRSV) ... went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

“Forgiveness” may be the wildest word in the Bible. It sets everything aside. It opens the possibility for everything to become new; anything can happen when we forgive.

The root meaning of the word for “forgiveness” is “to let go,” “to release,” “to set free.” “Salvation” adds the sense of “making room,” “safety, security,” “room enough for all.”

How much room is there at your Christmas table? How many places are set? To be sure, there is room for the folks who look like us and think like us and believe like us, but they’re not the point. Folks like us don’t need *“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”* Or perhaps I should say that if we’re only dealing with folks like us there’s no need for *“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*

But the prophetic word of the Lord is that *“all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.”* *“All flesh”* that is people like us and people not like us; people we like and people we don’t like.

Every family has this reality; where two or more are gathered, one is sure to be annoying. The one who keeps talking about politics, or religion, or themselves, or their children; we can hold that against them, but when we do we hold them in their sin and we hold ourselves in our sin.

How often is that the reality in our lives and our world? How often do we find ourselves stuck in ruts of resentment and bitterness? How many times do we find ourselves resigned to the way it is but secretly wishing that it could be better?

And in that moment, a moment just like this, John the Baptist appears with his camel skin attire and his honey and locust diet proclaiming the wild word of God: Forgiveness and repentance. He comes challenging us in the Advent season to get serious about our Christmas preparation. Tinsel and glitter aren’t enough; forgiveness and repentance are the word of God given to us at this holy time of year.

Forgiveness and repentance will change your life. Forgiveness and repentance will change our world.

John calls people to live lives consistent with the faith they profess and repent. This may not seem like good news, but the opportunity to repent is good news. Repentance is not about feeling sad or guilty. Repentance literally means changing directions. Repentance means changing one’s outlook, mind-set and living in a new way -- different and better than the way one has been living.

Charles Dickens’ novel “A Christmas Carol” is about repentance....

Ebenezer Scrooge was a wealthy businessman noted for being stingy. Scrooge understood the world as a harsh and scary place. He took life very seriously and was insensitive to the feelings

and needs of others. He was cold and harsh with everyone and had no sympathy for the poor. He went about his lonely existence until that Christmas Eve when he was visited by the ghost of his late business partner Jacob Marley, who informed Scrooge that he needed to make some serious changes in how he understood life and related to others. Otherwise, Marley warns Scrooge, he will end up just like Marley, wandering for eternity, bearing the chains and weights of his sins.

Scrooge didn't hear this as good news at all. He particularly disliked the part about the coming of three more spirits! Jacob Marley was a sort of John the Baptist figure for Scrooge. Like many of us, Scrooge knew that change could be painful and scary and cause him to feel uncomfortable, so he said, "I think I'd rather not." He had a whole list of reasons why he shouldn't be expected to change. He reasoned that he'd been, "no worse than the next man ... just a man of business." Skeptical, he retorted, "Bah, Humbug!" at even the thought of it. It was too late, he thought, he was too old to change and beyond hope. But despite his resistance, the spirits came anyway....

These experiences made quite an impact. Facing his past, and accepting realities of the present and future cause Scrooge to sincerely desire a new life. Scrooge awakens in his own bed a changed man. From that moment his life was different. The old penny pincher was dead. He was born anew. Many people grew to love Scrooge, who from then on was known as a generous, joy-filled and loving man.

This is really a beautiful and powerful story. Scrooge is not so different from any of us. The miracle of Christmas is that each of us can be born anew. We also can face our pasts, accept realities of the present and future, cut through our excuses and live new lives. This is only possible because we have been [saved]. [Salvation] isn't possible on our own. It's only possible through God.

God entered into human life as the baby Jesus, grew into adulthood, preached, taught, healed, died on the cross and rose from the dead so that we might live our lives in a new way. When we were baptized, the promises of God were offered to us. But, like Scrooge, many of us live as if we hadn't been baptized. Those spirits confronted Scrooge so he could find [salvation]. The Spirit of God also comes to us through our past, our present and future. Jesus' coming means we never need be under sin's absolute power again. As Tiny Tim once said, "God bless us everyone!"¹

God bless us as we respond to the wild word of God and repent, forgive, and receive salvation as our Christmas preparation. Amen.

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