

“How Do I Prepare?”

“Be Prepared” reads the motto of the Boy Scouts (no this is not a repeat of the sermon from November 8).

There are some things I am prepared to do because I have done so before. Cook a pot roast, put together a meat loaf, and make oven-fried chicken? I can do those almost blindfolded. Prepare a sermon, put together a lesson plan? Been there, done that.

There are some things I am prepared to do even though I have never done so before. Follow a new recipe. Find my way to Hayden, Idaho (location of a mission congregation to which I will tomorrow send the paraments from Epiphany, Northfield).

There are some things for which I am not prepared because I have not done so before. When we sold our home in Euclid, I was told by the city inspector that I had to cap a certain pipe; I had never sweat-jointed copper piping. I could find my way to Hayden, Idaho, but I could not fly an airplane to get there.

There are some things for which I am not prepared, even though I have been through them before: Disappointment. Hostility from another.

Today we hear St. Mark identify John the Baptist as the one who cries out, ***“Prepare the way of the LORD!”*** We’re not surprised by this; we are, in fact, prepared for it. Each Advent we are reminded that this the role of the Baptist: to prepare the way of the Lord. So, having experienced it before, we should be prepared to prepare. But each Advent finds us wondering *“How do I prepare?”*

What does it mean to prepare the way of the Lord? What’s involved? What’s it take? Am I ready to do so? Am I willing to do so? Valleys lifted up, mountains leveled . . . That all sounds fairly ominous — and hard!

Once I was watching a worker who was emptying out the back of a dump truck with a shovel and I asked him if he was going to fill up the entire hole by hand (it was about the size of two swimming pools). I have done a lot of digging in my time (it's what I did mostly when I worked construction during college) ... the idea of digging to level out a mountain is just beyond my comprehension

I wonder, sometimes, if that isn't how we often face up to preparing in Advent.

It becomes apparent pretty quickly in the Baptist's ministry what he means by "prepare."

It begins with "**Repent!**" That's a word we don't like to hear because we don't like to have to face the fact of our sinfulness. Oh, we don't mind in a church setting speaking the words "*I, a poor, miserable sinner*" or, "*we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.*" That latter one's easier because it's plural; it tells me that I am in good company, and, if in good company, how bad can my sin be? So ... who'd like to be the first one to stand up and tell the rest of us precisely which sins have held you in bondage this week? Me neither.

What we're really acknowledging is that we are not quite ready to repent. Now you may say, "*But Pastor, there's a big difference between admitting to God what I've done and announcing it to the congregation.*" Correct. But stop to think for a moment what that means. It means that my sin, which God is ready, willing, and able to wipe clean off the face of the earth — remove from us "***as far as east is from west***" (Psalm 103:12) — still has some power over me.

Did I really give that up to the Lord, then? Have I fully trusted that it has no sway in my life? Does not my anxiety over your reaction to my detailed confession admit that I am not fully convinced that God's forgiveness does what I say I believe it does? Why would I be concerned about how you view me? Isn't God's view the only one that matters?

I am challenged by those questions. And I am not prepared to answer

them. And that's my point. We so breezily state how much we believe, or how firmly we stand in the Lord . . . and we can't even seem to get to the fundamental starting point. We need to stop in Advent to ask: "*How do I prepare?*"

John invited people to baptism — that's not a bad place for us to begin, as well.

John's baptism was not Christian baptism — we know this for two reasons. 1) When St. Paul arrived in the city Ephesus, he discovered there people who had already heard the message about Jesus Christ, but knew only about the baptism from John. Upon hearing this, Paul immediately baptized them "*in the name of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 19:5). 2) John's baptism is described as a baptism of repentance; Christian baptism is one of forgiveness. John's only could signify; Christian baptism is efficacious (look it up).

That distinction is paramount for us Our baptisms do not just serve as a reminder, a token, a symbol of something else. Baptism *is* the something else: it is the cleansing, the drowning, the dying with Christ and being raised with Him. When we baptize, God actually does something in, with, and under the water. Come on, Pastor, we know that; we learned that in Confirmation Class years ago. Yet we live as if it were not true . . . or that we do not fully believe it.

If we fully trusted that God has done what God promises in our baptisms, our lives would be far richer, far more glorious, and we would be living in far greater freedom than most of us exhibit. As it is, most of us live our faith pretty close to the vest. We're not quite prepared to show our cards, to make known what we believe and what we trust. We are anxious that, if we show all that we hold, we will be . . . what? Rejected? Embarrassed? Held up to ridicule?

The prophet Isaiah has a message for us: "*Comfort, comfort my people.*" And what is the message of comfort? "*. . . she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double*

for all her sins.” Whatever was, is no more. It’s gone, dealt with, taken care of, wiped clean. And so?

So . . . get busy! *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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.”* Obviously this is metaphor; God is not expecting us to bring out earth-moving equipment and fill in the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreational Area. Provide easy access is the point. How?

“A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’” Just speak about the human condition — something you know, since you are part of it: *“All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, . . .”* But not just a message that *sic transit gloria mundi* (“how quickly passes the glory of this world”), not just that life is short (so, eat dessert first), or you can’t live forever, so live for today (*“Imagine there’s no heaven ...”*) *“The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”*

And what a word we have to proclaim: *“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”*

A fifth category of preparedness: There are some things for which I not prepared, because I have the sneaking suspicion that, if I prepare for them, I will be expected to do them. How do I prepare? I ask God to knock down all the barriers that I have erected in my life to prevent His using me as His instrument. I ask God to give me the confidence in His forgiveness and grace at work in me. I ask God to give me the boldness that counts only what He desires to matter. I ask God to give me a voice to proclaim Him, not just in the comfortable confines of this time and place, but wherever and whenever He has need for me to speak.

And I especially ask Him to overcome this sneaking suspicion that I will be expected to do something I may not wish to do, and that I become willing and able to do whatever He calls me to do.

In shortest: How do I prepare? I prepare me to be prepared to prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen.