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Sermon 19 December 2021

Title: Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room

(30 second pause)

- **Loud: Get ready!**
- Waiting can be uncomfortable, can't it?
- Disconcerting.
- Confusing.
- Anxious.
- Even painful.
- You were most likely not prepared for what just happened.
- You had to wait through 30 seconds of silence and you probably wondered what was happening.
- "Had something gone wrong?"
- "Was there some mistake?"
- "Was anything going to happen at all?"
- "Should we do something?"
- "What should we do?"
- **"Is there something we should be doing while we wait?"**
- Confusion turned to relief, *I would hope*, and anticipation to fulfilment, when that first word broke the silence.
- **After the silence, a voice cried out, "Get ready."**

- Imagine then, the experience of those who awaited not simply a Sunday sermon, but the long-foretold Messiah—who would come in power and glory to carry out justice and bring peace and righteousness. To save His people. To save the world.
- Good morning church family--Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent—we're as close to Christmas as we can be, but we're not there yet—still, we wait—because Advent is a time of waiting—a time to look forward to the coming of Jesus—the incarnate one, the Messiah, God among us, to look forward to the arrival of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of Peace and justice and righteousness.
- But it's hard to wait.
- Sometimes it's hard to know what to do—how to prepare—how to get ready for a Kingdom of Peace and Justice and Righteousness when we look at all the injustice and unrighteousness in the world. When we seem to live in a WILDERNESS of political divisions, oppression and inequality, exploitation of the planet and of people, --a world riddled with poverty and greed, when confusion and doubt run rampant in our own lives, when we see apathy and despair and grief all around—it's difficult to know what to do when all we seem to be able to do is wait
- That's certainly been the case since COVID arrived, we've waited and waited and followed the guidelines and gotten our jabs and cancelled plans and still—we're not out of the woods yet—in fact we're once again seeing a surge in cases and we hear the warnings about the potential for our health services to be overwhelmed—we're ready for this pandemic to end and sometimes we just don't know what to do
- it's hard to know what to do—how to prepare—to get ready for what's coming—when we have to wait

- And we live in a world where for so many things we don't have to wait—we can order a meal and it arrives at our door, we can decide to watch a movie or a TV show and download it instantly, and Amazon will deliver almost anything the next day, Argos will often deliver it the same day you order it
- But Advent reminds us to wait, even when we want instant gratification.
- Advent reminds us to wait for the arrival of peace and justice and righteousness.
- And Advent reminds us to prepare for that arrival.
- Preparation for that arrival is what the prophet Isaiah was writing about, when he wrote some 700 years before the birth of Christ:
- Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term, **---that the WAIT IS OVER---**  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.
- <sup>3</sup>A voice cries out:  
“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,--**let me read that again--** In  
the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,--  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
<sup>4</sup>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.  
<sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”
- 700 years later, a voice cried out in the wilderness—Get ready!--prepare the way of  
the Lord-- the wait was over. The Messiah was just about to arrive.

- 700 years later another prophet followed Isaiah. That prophet was John the Baptist, and this morning I want us to think about what it might mean to get ready for Jesus—to prepare for his coming—because that is a message we all not only need to be reminded of, but it is a message that we need to share with the whole world. It is a message that Isaac Watts proclaims in the hymn that’s been providing the theme for our sermons these past few weeks, Joy to the World, when Watts writes “let every heart prepare Him room—let every heart prepare Him room.”
- We saw back in our sermon series on the Gospels how Luke’s gospel begins the narrative of Jesus’ life by pairing the life of John the Baptist with that of Jesus—so from chapter 1, Luke begins with the foretelling of John the Baptist’s birth—the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah and says that Elizabeth will have a son and he is to name him John
- Then Gabriel appears to Mary, and Mary visits Elizabeth, then John the Baptist’s birth is sandwiched between Mary’s song and Zechariah’s song
- Then the second chapter is all about Jesus,
- But then in the first part of Chapter 3, Luke returns to the story of John the Baptist before turning back to the story of Jesus and linking John and Jesus at Jesus’ baptism—this back and forth is Luke’s brilliant way of weaving these two narratives together
- So let’s look at what’s going on here in Chapter 3 of Luke’s gospel
- In verses 1 and 2, Luke has set up for us the very specific time and place--Luke loves his details remember—He tells us that it was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler

of Galilee, --AND so on—at that time, the word of God came not to these political or religious leaders, not to them, but

- the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins
  -
- In the very next verse, Luke tells us that John is fulfilling vision of Isaiah that we just heard about—preparing the way for the Lord
- as 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.  
<sup>5</sup> 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;  
<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”’
- ”
- Luke is referring here to a real practice—when Kings and rulers would travel, they would send out heralds to go ahead of them and make sure that their route was clear and free of obstacles, and the reverse was also true—because a person’s enemies would litter the road with rocks and obstacles so that they couldn’t travel—but Luke is also being metaphorical here—the path that’s being made clear is not just in one place—it’s everywhere—EVERY valley and EVERY mountain all over the world—so that ALL flesh shall see the salvation of God—you’ll remember that this is one of Luke’s central themes here and in Acts—universal salvation—the idea that the gospel is for everyone—and so John the Baptist is calling for ALL THE WORLD to prepare to see the salvation of God—**some translations, like the NRSV we’re**

**reading from, say “for ALL FLESH”**—Jewish flesh, Gentile flesh, male flesh, female flesh, clean flesh, unclean flesh—if you’re made of flesh, there’s good news for you

- A so, in John the Baptist, A VOICE CRIES OUT IN THE WILDERNESS preparing the way for the Lord—the voice of the prophet cries out and says “Get ready.”
- As many of you know, my mother passed away last Sunday, and Pastor Tasha and I certainly appreciate all of your prayers and condolences. Her funeral was held on Thursday of this week, and we were unable to be there but we were able to be in contact with the family and to watch the livestream online—but all this week my mind has been sort of preoccupied with thoughts of all the times in the past that we would visit my parents’ home around the holidays—we’d always visit around Thanksgiving and Christmas—and when we would visit, we’d find that my Mom had always spent the days before we arrived getting ready for us to be there—even if we hadn’t told them we were coming, my Mom knew, somehow, and she’d have stocked the refrigerator and the pantry with things that she knew I liked to have—she’d have half-n-half for my morning coffee, and the specific kind of coffee we liked to drink, and bagels and cream cheese, and just about every breakfast cereal that I had ever eaten at any point in my life—Corn Flakes and Rice Krispies, maybe even Cap’n Crunch and Froot Loops, even though I hadn’t eaten those for breakfast since I was in grade school—but they were there just in case I might take a notion to have a big bowlful of sweetness first thing in the morning--but she wanted to be ready—and that house, especially our room, would be clean as a whistle—all scrubbed and spic and span--brand new bed linens, and towels set out and ready for us, a place for us to put our luggage and whatnot---and Dad of course helped out too—if there was anything that needed to be repaired or painted, any light bulbs replaced or any

faucets dripping, Christmas lights to be put up --everything was always ready, because every time--as they waited for us to arrive, they would clean up and do the work that needed to be done.

- And I want to suggest this morning that John the Baptist recommends the same when he tells his audience—those who heard him in the wilderness and we who hear his words this very day— to prepare the way of the Lord, in order to let every heart prepare Him room, we need to clean up and do the work that needs to be done.
- So let's look at what Luke writes in verse 3—he says that John the Baptist was Proclaiming a baptism of repentance FOR FORGIVENESS—
- When a person repents or confesses sometimes we say that they came clean— repentance and forgiveness is what the Psalmist is talking about when he writes “create in me a clean heart, Oh God”—so when JTB preaches a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, he's preaching about getting clean through the power of repentance AND forgiveness—and it's important to remember that those two go together---you know, sometimes churches—and individuals, too-- stress one and not the other—we often wind up putting the emphasis on GUILT on the one hand by stressing repentance or soft-pedaling responsibility on the other by stressing forgiveness-- but it is a powerful thing for a person to say not simply that “I have made bad choices,” or “I have made mistakes in my life,” but to say “I am a sinner” “Hopelessly enslaved to carnality”—to say as John Wesley said on his deathbed, recalling his brother's hymn, “I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me”—and that second part is just as important as the first, the idea that we, as Christians, believe that anyone—anyone—even a terrorist like Paul, a tax collector like

Matthew, a thief hanging on a cross, can repent and be forgiven—that is a radical idea that is at the very root of the church’s prophetic voice—**God can transform people beyond all human understanding**—whatever’s in our past—whatever’s cluttering up our heart, we can let that stuff go—we don’t need to hold on to guilt and shame but we can be washed clean—and so it’s not surprising that CROWDS of people who come to the river where John the Baptist was to get clean—to be washed in the water—to be baptized—because John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance and forgiveness.

- And when the crowds show up—John has something to say to them—in verse 7 we read:
- <sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers!
- This is where Luke shows us that John was a Baptist preacher, because I don’t think a Nazarene preacher would start out like that--—I have heard a lot of great preachers, Baptist and Nazarene and lots of other varieties, but I’ve never heard one start a sermon by calling the congregation names—brood of vipers—children of snakes—he doesn’t mince words and he doesn’t shy away from using strong language to let people know just where they stand—he continues
- Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’

- Wow—John doesn't mess around—he talks about the coming wrath—and asks the crowd who told you you could just RUN AWAY from it?
- **John the Baptist is here PORTRAYING THE SITUATION AS IT IS-- telling it STRAIGHT-**  
-He doesn't paint a pretty picture or use flowery language just to please the crowd—it tells it like it is in the most unambiguous of terms—and what he's saying is that
- JESUS is coming—and he's coming here, where you are—so it's time to prepare for His arrival—it's time to GET READY—so Don't RUN AWAY—do something—get cleaned up and THEN do the work that needs to be done—BEAR FRUITS WORTHY OF REPENTANCE—don't think you can just SAY that Abraham is your father and not ACT like it—you're like trees and God's ax is coming for you if you don't produce good fruit—and you'll be thrown into the fire—
- And so repentance and forgiveness are only the first part of John's instruction about how to prepare for Jesus arrival—a clean heart is important, but John tells us to bear fruit WORTHY of repentance—he tells us that there is work to be done.
- Of course, the crowd wants to know WHAT bearing fruits worthy of repentance MEANS—verse 10 tells us
- <sup>10</sup> **“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.**
- So the people are taking John's warning seriously—so what do you think his answer will be? Make sure you BELIEVE this thing, make sure that you take this particular position about this issue? Vote this way or that? Will he give them some general advice about how they should conduct themselves?
  - 11 John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptised. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

13 “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. 14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

- So here we see that John is SPECIFIC and real—he doesn’t just say “be generous” -- he says if you have food or clothing, share it with someone who has none—he says to the tax collectors, don’t take what isn’t yours to take—to the soldiers, don’t abuse your authority—stop falsely accusing people—and be content with what you’re paid—stop thinking that you don’t have enough and that you need more than what you have
- Here is the work that needs to be done after getting cleaned up—JTB responds to people who ask “what should we do?” by looking at real, tangible, honest situations—and there’s a lesson for the church here, an example to follow, because the prophet looks at the real world and says THIS doesn’t look like the Kingdom of God—this looks like inequality, and injustice, and oppression, and exploitation and greed, and you—person in the crowd, you tax collector, you soldier, you government officials, you office worker, you Pastor, YOU need to stop doing **these things** and start doing the **right thing**—because there is work to be done to prepare the way for the Kingdom of God and it’s not enough just to get clean and then sit smugly in your cleanness while the rest of the world can go to Hell—John says bear fruit worthy of your repentance—do the right thing—do the work that needs to be done in the world
- And I want you to notice that John doesn’t restrict his warnings and instructions just to the people who come to see him—we see in verse 19

- <sup>19</sup> But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, <sup>20</sup> Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.
- Now we could make the argument that if John wanted have some influence, to make a name for himself, he needed to make friends with those in power and stay out of their personal lives—John rebuked Herod because he stole his brother's wife—and we're told that John's rebuke is also because of all the other evil things he had done—but John does not turn a blind eye to unrighteousness simply because it might be beneficial or politically advantageous to do so—or quite literally, because speaking out might land him in jail—and this I think is a message the church could do with hearing today—if we remain quiet in the face of unrighteousness, injustice, inequality, evil, exploitation of people and the planet, **whether because of the promise of benefit or the threat of discomfort**, we will have sold our souls and become as Martin Luther king warned, an irrelevant social club—we are called to portray the situation AS IT IS—we are called to let people know they need to get cleaned up and then do the work that needs to be done
- Luke tells us in verse 18 that with many other exhortations, JTB proclaimed the good news to the people.
- Now Luke's use of the phrase "good news" might seem odd when you pair it with John's calling the crowd a brood of vipers and warning them about God's wrath—but that's the difference between a prophet and a person who just "tells the future"—a prophet calls people to repentance in order to AVOID what will happen if they don't change their ways—the wrath and judgement and destruction DOESN'T have to happen to them—so the message that the prophet brings is GOOD NEWS—and remember--if it ain't GOOD NEWS, it ain't the gospel—the GOSPEL is not just

critique, not just repentance, but also **forgiveness, AND a better way to live—the good news is not just about getting clean, but also about doing the work that needs to be done and seeing the world transformed because of it—seeing the arrival of the Kingdom**

- On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we remember John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus and who, like Isaiah before him, cried out to those who were waiting—and we are reminded of our calling to raise a prophetic voice that proclaims the **good news** of the coming Kingdom to those who are waiting to hear it—even as we also wait for its arrival—we are called to proclaim—Let every heart prepare Him room!
- We should each ask ourselves this morning--Is there room in my heart for Jesus—or has it gotten cluttered and crowded? Are there things maybe you need to let go of?—worry and anxiety and busyness and materialism and guilt and shame and insecurity-- so you can bear fruit—let every heart prepare Him room. As we approach the end of Advent, Let's clean up and get to work—while we wait.