

Rockland Congregational Church

Rev. Seth D. Jones

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Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11

“Making Way for the Lord”

Last week, we began the celebration of Advent, the season of waiting, the anticipation and welcome of new things and new ways of being. We spoke of a *future focused life* in Christ and the value of hope even in the midst of great difficulty. By looking to the future first and what Christ is leading us to, we can now look to the past and look at the way in which Christ’s coming unfolds and what it means for us as a community of faith.

John the Baptist, in Luke’s Gospel emerges out of a powerful historical context. Just as last week, hope sprang up in Jeremiah’s prophecy in the midst of impending war and imprisonment, so we see this week that the person of John the Baptist arises in the midst of Roman empire and the strong rule of Annas and Caiaphas in the Jewish Temple. John the Baptist is one of my favorite characters in the Bible. He is a little crazy. In Mark, he eats locusts and honey and wears a camel hair outfit with a leather belt. Not really the spokesperson you would expect for the coming of the Messiah.

There are no image handlers and marketing agents directing this event. No, John the Baptist hears the Word of God in the wilderness, implying that he has been out there for quite a long time – praying, listening, and considering. Then he wanders out into the land around the Jordan, “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” This strange idea should sound as strange to us now as it did back then.

The Christian faith is a strange and unusual thing and it creates strange and unusual people. John the Baptist, in this scene, becomes truly himself, truly human, in this proclamation of his. God has given him the power and the words for it, but God uses the already strange and unusual aspects of John himself to build the road that leads to Jesus Christ.

But let’s get back to the strangeness of “*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*”. Luke tells us what this is by quoting Isaiah. Luke says the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness*” that says, “*Prepare the way of the Lord.*” Repentance and the

forgiveness of sins prepare the way for the Lord, the Messiah.

Our present age, our modern way of thinking, our increasing distance from the experience of God in the mundane, hard-working experience of our daily lives, filled as they are with electronics, television, Internet and, this week, Tiger Woods, do not allow for the depth of what is going on here to sink in.

We fear it. We hear “repentance” and “sin” and immediately reject the premise outright because we think they are old, worn-out ideas, proven false by the reality of the post-modern world we live in now. But look at what repentance and forgiveness of sins are, according to Luke’s definition, by way of Isaiah:

Repentance and the forgiveness of sins is the act of “*making the paths of the Lord straight.*” And the experience of it is truly a grand experience – **imagine it with me for a moment:**

John the Baptist comes out of the wilderness, his hair and beard long, scraggly. His eyes are wild. It is as if his whole being glows with some inner light. He wears a weird camel hair cloak and a leather belt. He is just finishing eating some locusts and licks some honey off his fingers, wipes them on his camel hair cloak and then walks down to the edge of the water. At the edge of the Jordan, John starts preaching the coming of the Lord. Prepare the way by being forgiven. Repent in order to prepare the way. Know that the coming of the Lord means your guilt, your wrongs of the past, your brokenness becomes meaningless when you submit to the waters of forgiveness.

The crowds start to form. They listen and walk into the water and John the Baptist pushes them down, then yanks them back out. The baptized stand forgiven, ready, waiting. And the experience of it is that “*every valley is filled*”. The deepest places are filled with the glory and power of God.

In Yellowstone Park, there is a place called Ice Box Canyon. It is called that because in the summer, the sun doesn’t get into the canyon so the ice remains on the walls of the south side of the canyon walls all year long. It is a dark, dangerous place. If you slide off the road into Ice Box Canyon during a snowstorm, it could literally be until spring before anyone even knew you were down there. It is places like this that are filled. The experience of it is that “*every mountain and hill shall be made low*”. Those who have set themselves on the highest places, who have made themselves gods in their minds, shall be brought low.

John the Baptist, though, also understands something about the natural world. It is

bigger than we are and in being so, it points in one direction – to God and what God will do for us. High, rocky, craggy mountains tell us that the mountains are very young. Low, hilly mountains tell us the mountains are very old. God’s work takes time and the natural world tells us those simple, deep things about God’s way.

But at the same time, the eternity of God, those words which last forever spoken of last week from our Gospel reading last week, knows nothing of time. When the eternity of God enacts itself in history, “*the crooked is made straight and the rough ways made smooth.*” And then, once the way is prepared, once the road is built to welcome the King of Kings, “all flesh”, and by that is meant “all earthly things”, “*all earthly things shall see the salvation of God.*” John the Baptist invites those who stand on the shores of the Jordan to participate in this way, to get wet and find out what it really means to welcome the one we have been waiting for all this time.

But these are only beginnings. There is the waiting for the Messiah, and then there is the arrival of the Messiah. The real work begins when the Messiah arrives, when Jesus Christ walks into town, walks into our church, walks into our lives.

How do we prepare for it? How do we make ourselves ready for the arrival of the Christ? The very early Christians called the new faith in the Resurrection and promise of Jesus Christ “The Way”. In calling it “The Way”, those early Christians recognized some interesting things. First and foremost, they recognized in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of everything that Isaiah said, and also what John the Baptist ushered into the world. The way had been prepared and the road led straight into this new community of being that sought its completion in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As I consider these stories – the Exodus, Isaiah’s words today, John the Baptist and his ministry, Jesus and the Gospels, and Paul’s letter – I see these stories as new roads built upon old roads, over and over again.

The story spirals and circles and draws us deeper into a relationship with God and with one another. The Way is a way that at once looks to the stories of the past and at the same time looks to a new future story, one that writes each of us into its rich tapestry, into the Book of Life, as the prophet Daniel calls it.

I put it this way – The Way as story, as a road leading into the future and built from the past – because I want us to recognize that our commitment to the faith is first and foremost not based on our behavior, either now or in the past. Instead, our

commitment to the faith, The Way, is a complete commitment to a dangerous act of Trust in the God who frees, comforts and seeks peace and love and justice in a broken, crazy world. We trust that God does what God says God will do.

And we look back to the road that has brought us to this very moment to confirm our sense of promise in God.^[1] By looking deeper into the story we have committed ourselves to, we begin to look at the present and see we are being transformed, even against our own desires, into a way which begins to mirror the life and work of Jesus Christ in our own lives. In other words, we are being fashioned into a unique community of relationships of people, all of whom seek to be “*of the same mind as Jesus Christ*” (Phil 2:5), to be conformed by the ways of a God who seeks to free us from the bondage of self-interest and self-fulfillment.

It is here, in this freedom, that we become the people whom God truly wishes us to be, where we, like John the Baptist, become truly human. And it is important to recognize an interesting thing about what God and Christ do for us: we are freed as a people, as a group. Our individual and very American obsession with personal salvation and personal growth is actually antithetical to the experience of God’s people.

Instead, God seeks to bring us closer and closer together as a committed people, as a church, as a community and world of people who seek the will of God. But in doing that, we actually become more deeply the individual God intends us to be. Think of the disciples. No one can be Peter like Peter. No one can be Nathaniel like Nathaniel. No one can become John better than John. But in Christ, each of them become even more so Peter, Nathaniel and John for the sake of the great work of the people of Jesus Christ.

I used to think being a Christian meant become a sort of robot for Christ. And in some ways it doesn’t help that Paul sprinkles his letters with all kinds of allusions to being a slave. But Paul’s intention is to show the Philippians in particular that being one who submits completely to Jesus Christ is so “*your love may overflow more and more with the knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*” (Phil 1:10-11).

What John the Baptist knew as he prepared the Way for Jesus and what Paul also knows is that the experience, the reality, the truth of Jesus Christ in the world and

for the world can only be known by living it out. What if we understood our personal stories, our communal stories as the road which tells us that humanity is made for this moment in today's Gospel: the Coming of Christ? What if we lived out the story we have chosen for ourselves in such a way that all of our existence found its meaning in the story of the life of Jesus Christ? What does your story look like in the light of Jesus Christ? How does all the pain, all the despair, all the loss and all the things that cause you anger and all the examples of injustice in the world write themselves differently when their meaning is found in Jesus Christ?

How does Jesus coming to you change your story? What is the Gospel story you would write? All of what we are talking about today started because some crazy guy walked out of the wilderness and started preaching by the river. The Way was prepared, the road was built, the story was told again in a new world and the coming of the Messiah changed the world. In the Jewish tradition, whenever the Passover Seder is celebrated, it is meant to be a reenactment of the whole story of the Israelites so that every year the Jews can experience again God's freeing power, God's desire for God's people to live out a greater vision, one which points beyond personal desires and personal gain, God's will for a just and peace-filled experience of life for all peoples, all nations.

In our day and age, the word "story" means untruth. But that is a modern understanding based upon false premises. Not so long ago, the story told to the people was the road preparing the way for the newness God was bringing into the world. Not so long ago, one's capacity to commit to anything was based on how closely the story being told resembled lived experience. Not so long ago, the story told created the world we live in. When we share communion together, we are doing what the Jewish faith does during the Seder – reliving and repeating and re-experiencing the story as if it were happening right now. We remember the way things came to be and in doing so we prepare the way again so we might walk it as a repentant, forgiven and cleansed people who await, yet again, the arrival of the Christ, the Light of the World, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

With this story, as Fred Craddock, the great preacher, says, "*all devices for maintaining an illusion of innocence must be abandoned.*"^[2] With this story, the voice of the listener to God, the one who cries out in the wilderness, "*can help to fill up the valleys of ignorance, to bring down the hills and mountains of stubborn prejudice and pride, to straighten people's crooked thinking, to smooth the rough ground of instinctive resistance which human nature interposes before the feet of*

God."[\[3\]](#) With this story, God begins again a new and good work among us and brings it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6).

Come to the edge of the water. Hear the story again. Seek God's will as sought in the Holy Scriptures. Walk together in the ways of the Lord. Proclaim what Christ's Gospel has written upon your heart. Depend on the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth.

Let us all participate in the story that is the body and blood of Christ so we might become the grace of God for all people. Let us all follow The Way of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN

Rev. Seth D. Jones

Rockland Congregational Church

180 Limerock Street

Rockland, Maine 04841

revsdj@midcoast.com

www.rocklandcongregationalchurch.com

207-594-8656